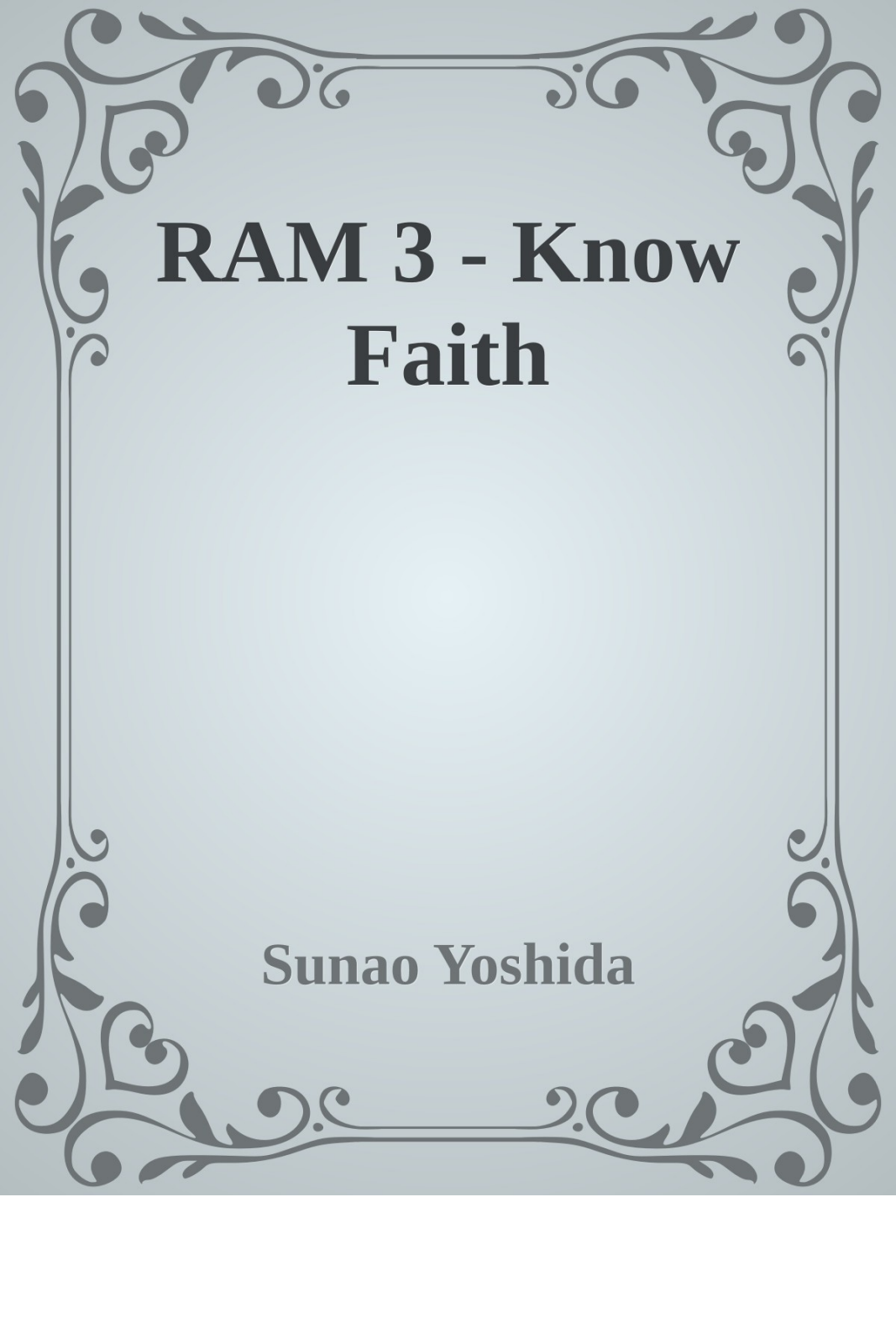


A decorative border with intricate floral and scrollwork patterns, rendered in a light gray color, framing the central text.

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TRINITY BLOOD™

RAGE AGAINST THE MOONS

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Trinity Blood

Rage Against the Moons

Know Faith

Sunao Yoshida

Special thanks to:

evenstar and Welyn of Trinity Blood Community for providing the informations and files necessary for the making of this epub!

epub by: jianreyes02

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Midnight Run

But when they persecute you in this city, flee ye into another.

— *Matthew 10:23*

I

"Our Father, who art in heaven," recited Abel. The traveling priest Abel Nightroad prayed while jumping into the roadway. He could clearly see inside the open mouth of the streetcar driver whom he'd followed that far. "Abbreviate the rest, if you please!" Abel requested. The instant he curled his body into a ball and rolled, machine pistol rounds grazed his cassock, scattering bits of it across the sidewalk behind him. Not a moment had passed when the frame of the streetcar slid between the priest and the sidewalk, making a shrill braking noise.

A young man with wildly flowing bleached brown hair was shouting something from across the sidewalk. "This way, Abel! Now! "Abel's clever companion Antonio undoubtedly had escaped on his own during the shooting.

Half impressed and half dumbfounded by Antonio's shrewdness, Abel quickly stood up.

Cologne, a prominent city in the Germanics Kingdom, was a traditional university city. However, there wasn't too much traffic at night. As the frame of the streetcar passed under the pale moonlight, it left a trail of beautiful sparks.

"Hurry, quickly!" urged Antonio.

"P-please wait, prince. Please don't abandon me!" Abel pleaded.

By the time the streetcar had passed, Abel finally had trudged to the opposite sidewalk. The young man ahead of him had already halfway descended the stairs leading to the subterranean tunnels. When Abel, wearing a frozen smile, turned back toward the sidewalk he had been on three seconds prior, two large men were standing there, both in black coats and soft hats, with faces that made them appear as if they were twins. Both their Bergmann machine gun muzzles were pointed at the priest's forehead.

"E-EEK!" shrieked Abel.

If his knees hadn't given way, Abel's body certainly would have been torn to shreds. Countless bullets mowed down the area where his head had just been. Incapable of standing up, the silver-haired priest slid down the steep stairs with the nimbleness of a cockroach being chased. He tumbled to the bottom in one fell swoop, emitting a sustained, shrill scream that would make anyone within earshot wince.

"Are you dead, Abel?" asked Antonio. The young man who'd descended first greeted the priest with great interest as Abel landed on his face. Peering down at his twitching back, Antonio poked Abel with a toe. "If you're going to die, please tell me so, because I'll surrender if my bullet shield is dead."

"Oooh, God, lately my life has too few blessings. S-somehow, I'm alive. Are you all right, prince?" asked Abel.

"Yeah, barely, but . . ." replied Antonio, who uncannily didn't bear a scratch on his carefree face. "My hairstyle is completely ruined. After all, hair is a man's life, right?" Antonio said as he shook his head dramatically.

"Please worry about your real life right now!" Abel replied. As the sound of footsteps emerged from the top of the stairs, he hurriedly jumped up. "Save your worries about your hair for when we've safely rounded up everyone in Neue Vatican. Right now, we have to run!"

When Abel drew his museum-piece percussion revolver, the black coats appeared at the top of the stairs, simultaneously pulling the triggers of their machine guns.

II

We haven't yet found former Archbishop Alfonso d'Este," Caterina explained. Tonight, a bitter vibrato strained her sweet voice, which usually sounded like a perfectly tuned instrument.

On the high ceiling in Castle Santangelo's Iblis Room, there was a painting of a beautiful queen ascending to heaven, saving a desert city from the evil clutches of vampires. Her breathtaking features, which concealed her high spirits and happiness, somewhat resembled those of Minister of Foreign Affairs Cardinal Caterina Sforza.

"Immediately following the recent terrorist incident, the local Department of Foreign Affairs staff thoroughly searched the Archbishop of Cologne's jurisdiction, but nearly all the crucial data regarding the heretical organization the former Archbishop of Cologne had set up was destroyed. Based on that knowledge . . ." Caterina continued, her razor-colored eyes coldly scanning the attending high-ranking church workers, "there's probably someone among us who's given them information."

"A-are you saying there's a traitor, s-sister?" asked Alessandro, who was dressed in white vestments as he timidly gazed up at the beautiful woman. His ash-colored eyes—the only part of his freckled, seedy-looking face that resembled his sister—nervously darted from side to side.

The Vatican's three hundred ninety-ninth Pope, Alessandro XVIII, regarded the attendees with an undeniably frightened demeanor. "B-but, wh-wh-who in the world? W-we don't know where my uncle is. Th-the data on Neue Vatican has been d-discarded."

"Don't let it upset you, Your Holiness," Caterina said, smiling kindly in an attempt to calm her half brother, who'd been crowned with the crown and throne at age eighteen. "I said, nearly all the data

had been destroyed."

A large man in vestments who had been seated between Caterina and the Pope called out in a deep voice: "So, does that mean a portion is left, Caterina?" Cardinal Francesco di Medici, the man who controlled public order within the Vatican as the Minister of Doctrine, narrowed his sabre-colored eyes and folded his thick arms in front of him. "Is the data so valuable that it can advance our investigation?" he asked.

"I don't know, because it hasn't yet reached our hands," replied Caterina. Her delivery was outwardly polite, but punctuated with chilly indifference. The relationship between the half siblings had soured as of late. It was no longer public record, but during the last terrorist incident in Rome, Caterina's special AX agents had clashed in the city with the Bureau of Inquisition under Francesco's control. The episode had resulted in heavy casualties and was fresh in their memories.

"The aforementioned data is somewhere in Cologne, and it undoubtedly will provide extremely valuable internal intelligence for pursuing Neue Vatican," Caterina said.

"How do you know?" Francesco asked suspiciously.

"Because according to the report, it's a list of the names of those who belong to Neue Vatican," Caterina replied plainly.

"What?" Francesco gasped with surprise, as did everybody assembled. If they had a list of the names of everyone who belonged to Neue Vatican, the terrorist incident would be elucidated in no time.

"Caterina, why are you being so cautious?" Francesco roared, striking the desk with his meaty hands. "If it's that useful, you should bring it here as soon as possible! Don't you realize that if you leave it in Cologne, they can steal it back at any time?"

"I've already sent the recovery team to its location. It's now eleven o'clock. They'll arrive in Cologne tomorrow morning at five o'clock and are scheduled to return to Rome after securing the person

safeguarding the data," Caterina explained.

"The person safeguarding the data?" asked Giuseppe Moretti, the Bureau Director of the Holy Treasure Authorization, who had extremely sharp hearing. "Cardinal Sforza, are you saying that somebody within the city of Cologne has that list now?"

"Yes, and he asked for our protection, knowing that Neue Vatican was after him," replied Caterina.

"What kind of person is he?" inquired Giuseppe, confidently cocking his head like a wise owl because he held a PhD and was an expert in lost technology research. "How did he get his hands on that list in the first place?"

"The person in question is a student from Hispania studying abroad at the Cologne Divinity School. His name is Antonio Borgia," said Caterina. "He's the son of Hispania Kingdom's Prime Minister Carlos Borgia, Prince of Valencia. Alfonso d'Este contacted him in order to connect a pipe to Hispania Kingdom. We think he handed over the list to the prince at that time."

"Wh-what!" a voice blurted out rendering Caterina's efforts to play down the situation ineffective. The attending church workers' eyes nearly fell from their sockets—and for good reason: Hispania was a major power in the Western world, rivaling Germanics or Albion, and the Prince of Valencia was a high noble in that nation. If such an important person's child happened to be killed by the bunch who'd inhabited the Vatican until the other day...

"You said the recovery team is going to arrive tomorrow morning, Caterina! What do you intend to do if the Neue Vatican bunch takes action tonight?" bellowed Francesco as if the enemy army already were closing in. "Request support from Germanics through diplomatic channels at once. Dispatch an army to Cologne and protect the prince!" ordered Francesco.

"Wait, brother. It isn't a good idea to use Germanics' help here. Besides, if Germanics were to get its hands on that list simply because it protected the prince, the situation would get far more complicated," Caterina said.

"Hmm." Francesco couldn't think of anything to say in response to his younger sister's point.

Caterina was just as angry about the situation, but when she considered the previous incident in Rome, she recognized that Neue Vatican had a very long reach. There was no guarantee that the young nobleman could get through the night safely.

Sitting with folded hands and praying to God wasn't Caterina's style. After re-crossing her long legs under her vestments, she made a steeple with her fingers and rested her chin on it. "The truth is, I had already decided to set up some insurance by sending one agent ahead of the recovery team. He'll protect the prince until dawn."

"One person? Will only one person be okay?" asked Francesco.

"You needn't worry," Caterina said with a thin smile and a knowing glimmer in her eye. "I sent the highest talent in the Vatican to Cologne. He's a man who has the know-how to anticipate any kind of situation, the ability to adapt to all kinds of environments, and a tough spiritual strength that doesn't waver under the pressure of any crisis. I'm sure he'll meet my expectations—and pull it all off without raising an eyebrow."

III

“Oh, God—with this mountain of dangerous crises, my life is like a flame before the wind,” Abel moaned.

At five hundred fifteen feet high, the dome was the largest building in Cologne. The two black steeples that were said to have required six hundred years to complete cast shadows on the black line of the river's surface. Gazing up at the two moons that shone between them, Abel begged for mercy, drawing letters in his tears on the counter.



"I've had enough already—so now, please save me immediately," begged Abel.

"You really aren't cool, are you, Abel?" replied Antonio.

In the Rhine steamship's Cologne arrival and departure waiting room, at the counter of a deserted cheap cafeteria that was doing late-night business, a long-haired youth was tipping a glass of local brew. Because he was either very daring or simply stupid, he checked the arrangement of his hair with an elegance that contrasted with his companion's lack thereof.

"I nominated you because I heard you were 'the highest talent in the Vatican,' but I'd imagined someone more stylish—a dandy. I was sure you'd ruthlessly beat the bad guys, toss back your hair, and declare 'mission accomplished' in a cool way. However,"—the young man—Antonio Borgia, the son of the Prince of Valencia—emptied his third glass as he glanced sideways at the priest drawing letters next to him—"you really aren't cool, are you?"

"Sorry for not being cool," Abel responded timidly as he tugged at his overly long shirt cuff. Abel's new summer cassock was full of holes, and because he'd fallen in the gutter while running away, he'd discarded it amid a fit of sobbing. He was now wearing clothes borrowed from Antonio. A bodyguard who borrowed clothes from the object of his protection . . . maybe he really wasn't cool.

If he could make any excuse, it was Abel's deliberate intent and his security plan to have met the object of his protection in a populous city. He'd assessed that the Neue Vatican clan wouldn't be so stupid as to attack them on a public street. However, they had attacked before he'd moved ten steps after contacting Antonio, and they'd brandished machine guns in a city. They were that desperate to recover the list, and they probably didn't care about appearances anymore.

"By the way, prince, about that list . . ." Abel said, sighing before refocusing his gaze on the ground. As he picked at the mound of potatoes, sauerkraut, and sausage, he continued, "Where is it being safeguarded now? Shouldn't we leave here immediately and get it?"

"Sorry, but I still can't tell you that," replied Antonio.

Seemingly out of nowhere, a beautiful, leggy woman came into the waiting room, swinging her hips provocatively. Antonio shrugged as his eyes shamelessly followed the path of her huge, jiggling chest.

"If I told you, you might not put as much effort into protecting me, right?" asked Antonio.

"Don't worry—I'll protect you well, because that's my job. Although, who knows what may happen thereafter," Abel replied, mumbling the last half of his speech.

There were four hours left until the arrival of reinforcements. In this condition, Abel probably couldn't hold out the next time he was attacked. The Neue Vatican sympathizers in Cologne seemed to have a much greater influence than he'd predicted. In this situation, when he couldn't even rely on the church, staying within the city was pointless and dangerous.

"I'm taking you out of the city with me, prince." As soon as he'd confirmed the time of the last boat on the timetable, Abel made up his mind. "When the recovery team arrives in the morning, we'll send them to the list's hiding place—but for tonight, I want to get you out of the city."

A Rhine River passenger boat was leaving from the boat station for Düsseldorf. If they made it as far as Düsseldorf, they likely would be able to continue from there to Rome via the night train.

Antonio shook his head. "Sorry, but that's impossible."

"Why?" asked Abel.

"I tend to get seasick. Neither boats nor trains are good—my semicircular canals are weak."

Abel stood there, silent. *Right now, no doubt, I'm smiling the way my boss does when she's angry—like a mass murderer looking for my next victim.* As he brutally stabbed a sausage with his fork, Abel smiled. "So?"

"If we're going to move, can't we go by airplane or airship? When I traveled to visit my family before, I chartered a limited sleeper express; curiously, that time I didn't get sick," Antonio stated.

Holding his cheeks next to Antonio, who continued to indulge in pleasant memories, the priest groaned. "Ohhh, God, I feel terribly sick. I can't meet that kind of expense by squeezing out my lifeblood! I will absolutely have you get on a boat here, regardless of whether you puke up your internal organs!" he insisted.

"But..." Antonio said hesitantly.

"This is no time for a 'but!' I'll go buy the tickets. You wait here, please. All right? No matter what happens, don't move!"

Abel stood up, glaring at the young nobleman who appeared as though he still wanted to say something. Holding his throbbing cheek, Abel approached the ticket counter. "Excuse me ... two second-class tickets to Düsseldorf, please."

Abel peered up at the clock on the wall as he asked the unfriendly old man at the counter for tickets. It was one o'clock in the morning; there were still four hours until dawn. "Oh, and can I have a receipt, too?" he asked. "Please address it to the Vatican Department of Foreign Affairs."

"The Vatican? You?" asked the old man.

"Yes. I'm a priest, actually. I'm dressed like this because I have some business," Abel hurriedly explained to the old man, who raised his eyebrows suspiciously when he noticed that Abel's suit was too short. At times like these, it was inconvenient not to be wearing a cassock.

"I work for the Vatican Department of Foreign Affairs. Let's see, here are my ID papers," Abel said.

"Excuse me a moment," replied the old man.

Suddenly, a dour man standing next to Abel stopped the priest's hand as it was about to dig into his pocket and said, "You're a priest?"

Abel turned toward the voice. "Yes, I am."

A conscientious-looking man in his prime put his hand into a bag. He was wearing a simple suit, but his unassailable posturing wasn't that of a civilian.

Abel cocked his head affably while slowly reaching for the holster hung on his shoulder. "Urn, who are you?"

"I'm Inspector Gunter Lentz of the Cologne City Police," answered the man as he removed a badge from a pocket inside his suit. His Germanics bluntness was intimidating, but the police emblem that shone under the light of the gas lamp was equally threatening. "I'm investigating a shooting incident that occurred a few hours ago at a streetcar on Hoffstrasse. I'll cut right to the chase: Father, weren't you present there at that time? There is a witness who saw a tall, silver-haired priest flee from the scene right after the incident."

Lentz stared at Abel's hair with hawklike eyes. Did he suspect Abel of being a criminal? Even if he weren't a suspect, being taken in by the police as a witness definitely would make it difficult to board a boat.

"Isn't this some mistake?" asked Abel. *Oh God, please forgive me for telling a lie*, he thought as he drew the sign of the cross across his heart with his fingertip. "Look, there are tall, silver-haired priests with glasses everywhere."

"You know a lot, don't you, Father?" asked the detective. "That priest was wearing glasses." "Oops."

Lentz glared menacingly at the priest who'd quickly dug his own grave and jumped in. Changing clothes and trying to leave the city during the night probably hadn't helped if he were suspected of planning an escape.

"By all means, I want to talk to you about this in detail. For now, though, will you accompany me to the station?" asked the detective.

"N-no. That is, I'm really in a hurry now—yeah! Prince! Prince Antonio! Please vouch for me that I don't have anything to do with

that incident!" pleaded Abel.

Antonio exited the waiting room, shaking his head sadly. "I can't do that, Abel. I'm a Divinity student—I can't lie. Besides..." The young nobleman shrugged as he visually compared the detective, who was glaring with increasingly cold eyes at Abel, to the cornered priest. "It's fine. This time, I can get the police to protect me. I'll even tell them all about the list."

"List? What list?" inquired the detective.

Abel hastily stepped between Antonio and Lentz, whose curiosity had been aroused by the intriguing word.

"P-prince, no!" shouted Abel.

It would be dreadful if Germanics authorities found out about Neue Vatican's list. Besides that, it was a controversial military nation. They might use that as proof to blackmail Rome, or they might try to seize the list. More important, Caterina's anger would be unbearable.

"Please stop talking about the list here. If Germanics finds out —"Abel said.

"It's none of my business. I can go with either Germanics or the Vatican depending upon who takes good care of me, right?" asked Antonio.

"A-and you're a Divinity student?"

The lights unexpectedly went out as Abel tried to block the young man's mouth with his hand.

"Wh-what is it?" cried a voice.

"The gaslights went out! Strange . . . it's only in this building—they're fine next door," replied the detective.

A wave of consternation surged among the darkness.

"Calm down! You'll get hurt if you panic!" shouted Lentz. The

detective proceeded to authoritatively deliver instructions to the confused men. "Somebody look at the gas valve, because there might be a gas leak. And don't use fire—there's a danger of flash fire."

"Prince, now," whispered Abel amid the darkness. "Let's take this opportunity to escape."

"But Abel, they told us to cooperate with the investigation," Antonio replied.

"If we end up getting sealed into the police station, we'll have nowhere to run in an attack. The opportunity to escape into the darkness is a gift from God. It would be dishonorable to waste it!" Abel exclaimed.

Unfortunately, it didn't take too long to notice that the supposed opportunity was not the favor of a generous God, but instead the trap of a malicious devil.

As Abel inched toward the exit during the confusion, a door suddenly flew open in his face. A huge shadow, like a death god dressed in a black coat, materialized, clutching something in its hands.

"Uh-oh. Is th-this the guy from before?" asked Abel.

The moment the beady eyes hidden beneath the soft black hat caught sight of the priest, the muzzle of the machine gun inclined like a poisonous snake rearing its head. Abel reflexively jumped sideways. Half a second after he pushed Antonio down next to him, tongues of calamitous flames began to dance in the darkness along to a pulsating noise that echoed in his stomach.

The darkness and reverberating gunfire caused panicked screams to pour from the narrow waiting room.

"Th-this is awful. This way, prince!" directed Abel. There was no time to draw his gun, so he thrust his shoulders through the window, jumping onto the gently sloping riverbank through a hail of glass fragments. "Come on, prince! You have to hurry, too!"

"Out of my way, Abel!" shouted Antonio before landing on Abel's back. "You buy us some time, and I'll escape while you do."

"Buy time? How am I supposed to fend off those dangerous people?" Abel asked.

"Don't be weak—you're my bullet shield!"

"That's unreasonable! I'm your wha—?" Abel gaped.

The large, lurking shadow leaned out of the window overhead as the two men quarreled. The muzzle of the machine gun in its hands was aimed downward toward Abel, trailing gun smoke.

"Oh shit!" yelled Abel. He hefted the percussion revolver that he'd finally succeeded in drawing from its holster, aiming it at the big man who was about to fire at Antonio's back as Antonio ran down the embankment.

Although the two guns emitted fire at exactly the same time, only one stifled cry could be heard. Abel's percussion revolver bullet shot the window blinds over the head of the large man. The catch broke, causing the blinds to fall and obstruct the machine gun's target. As a result, the machine gun released a band of fire far from its mark.

"Good! But what'll we do now?" asked Abel.

Antonio was tumbling down the bank as Abel ran into a dark alley, nervously clicking his tongue. Their plan to escape by the waterway was null and void. By now, the station had to be surrounded by police. They'd have to catch a street coach and lay low in an inn somewhere instead.

"Abel, look! It's help from heaven!" Antonio exclaimed as he led the way, whistling.

One street coach was entering the alley from the direction of the main street. Other than the driver, nobody was on board.

"God, thank you. Please stop that carriage!" Abel ordered. He quickly hid his handgun and waved his hands wildly. It wasn't a large carriage, but the alley was narrow, so the carriage completely

blocked the way.

"Stop! Please let us on!" Abel pleaded.

"Let you on? Yes, of course," the driver atop the carriage's driver's seat responded courteously, a cigar stuck carelessly to the edge of his lips. "I'll let you on ... as corpses."

Peering at the two stunned men, the driver pulled out a glistening machine gun from beneath his black coat.

IV

Machine guns at the front gate, machine guns at the back gate. God, you've been tormenting me too much lately," Abel moaned.

"Abel, you're supposed to be my bullet shield! Do something about these guys quickly!" shouted Antonio.

The huge shadow in the black coat stood behind the priest and the Divinity student as they wailed at each other. It was the same man who'd attacked in the boat station a little while earlier. Except for the fact that he didn't have a cigar, his face was exactly like that of the man on the carriage.

"You caused us a lot of trouble, but we've finally caught you, Antonio," said the man from the boat station, turning up his lips happily. He slid his gun muzzle, closely following the prince's face as the prince tried to hide behind Abel. "That thing you swiped—our boss really likes it. That's why we have strict orders not to let you die easily under any circumstances. Prepare yourself."



"P-please wait!" said Abel, barely managing to move his tongue as he watched the fingers on the triggers in front and back of them. It seemed as if the two Neue Vatican adherents intended to finish Antonio here. "We don't have that list yet! Never mind me—wouldn't it be awful to kill a prince?" "List? What are you talking about?" asked the man in the menacing black coat. "We only came to beat that shitty brat to death on Papa Zeppu's orders."

"Who's Papa Zeppu? I don't know any such person," Abel replied as he turned to face Antonio, who clapped his hands as if he'd suddenly remembered something. The expression on Antonio's face suggested that he had a bad premonition. "Urn, do you have some idea, prince?"

The prince raised one finger and answered cheerfully: "Yeah, Papa Zeppu—he's the boss of a famous gang. He's called the emperor of the Cologne underworld."

"G-gang boss?" exclaimed Abel. *What in the world is he talking about? That means the two people in front of us aren't from Neue Vatican after all?* "P-please wait a moment. Why is that unusual type of hired man following us—I mean you— prince?"

"Hmm, I really can't think of a reason," Antonio replied, folding both arms as if completely stumped. "I only stopped in at his casino once or twice to visit Eva. I didn't win much those times, either."

"Eva? Who's Eva?" asked Abel.

The black coats' faces appeared more and more threatening. While pretending not to notice, Abel spluttered. He felt cold— terribly cold.

"Eva's my girlfriend . . . and Papa Zeppu's lover. She said before that she wanted to move out of Cologne, so I wrote her a letter inviting her to my father's place and got her out of the city," Antonio explained.

The black coats' machine guns raised in unison before the priests eyes, causing him to stiffen like a fossil.

"And that's not all. You were the one who convinced that bitch to take the bordello's customer list with her, right, Antonio?" asked a man.

"Well, yeah, because I thought Papa Zeppu couldn't touch her if she had that in hand. But in the end, she didn't take the list with her, so you shouldn't be so angry," Antonio said.

"That's not the problem!" shouted the men, their two angry roars overlapping.

"With his lover stolen away, the boss' honor is in complete ruins. I don't know if you're a noble kid or not, but he won't be satisfied until you're turned into a honeycomb, so prepare yourself," said one of the men.

A fainthearted person might have died inside when confronted with a voice so dark that it sounded as if it were spouting up from the bottom of hell. However, the high nobleman from Hispania didn't so much as quiver with the force of a gentle breeze.

"It's going to be a problem if you make fun of us. Come on, Father Abel!" Antonio called out. As soon as he ran his fingers through his hair with the confidence of a true noble, he snapped them forcefully. "It's your turn—don't hold back. Take care of these people who don't know their place! I've got your back, and I'll cheer you on with everything I have!"

"H-how can I?" asked Abel.

The black coat with the cigar thrust his chin at Abel, inciting a dramatic scream. "Yeah, Father, you get out of the way. They say you go to hell if you kill a priest. If you don't interfere, we'll let you go," said the man.

"Eh? R-really? Ugh!" Abel replied.

"It'll be a problem if you make fun of him," warned Antonio, calmly blurring as Abel, whose face had shone with hope in light of the man's tempting offer, suddenly felt a blow to the pit of his stomach. "Father Abel is a friend bound to me by ties of the soul. Do you

think he'll abandon me?"

"Didn't you call me your bullet shield a little while ago?" asked Abel.

Antonio shook his head resolutely at his sole companion. "Don't worry about trifles, friend. C'mon, never mind that—if you're going to kill me, you should do it after killing him! He's already prepared!"

The gang members nodded affirmatively at the priest, who shook his head as if unwilling. "I see. Well, now that you've said that much, it can't be helped," said the man.

"No, I didn't say anything! Wah! Don't point those things at me!" screamed Abel.

Continuing to overlook that the wailing priest was being used as a shield, the two black coats tightened their grip on the triggers. "Die!" they shouted.

Gunfire reverberated, overpowering the black coats' angry roars, but it wasn't the rhythmical firing noise of their machine guns. Still trying to pull the triggers, they dropped their guns and groaned, clutching their shoulders where fresh blood was gushing out.

All of a sudden, a group of shadows appeared in the dim arc lights. "Somehow, we seem to have made it in time," said a voice.

Smoke trailed from a small pocket pistol gripped in the hand of the human shadow leading a group of about ten policemen. With a fixed stern expression, the human shadow addressed the two young men in a grim, raspy voice. "Are you all right? Are you hurt?"

"A-are we s-saved? Am I still alive?" asked Abel, heaving his shoulders dramatically before he collapsed. He remembered the face of the man in the plain suit who had led the policemen—it was Cologne City Police Inspector Lentz.

"I saw these men following you and came for you at once. That was close," said Lentz.

"Th-thanks to you, we're safe, inspector," said Abel, watching the men writhing on the ground. How will Caterina react when I report that instead of protecting the list from Neue Vatican's partners, I got mixed up in a lovers' quarrel between a gang and a young idiot?

"So, Father Nightroad, who in the world are these people?" asked the inspector.

"Ehh ... the truth is, this is a lovers' quarrel," replied Abel, who was about to faint in relief.

"They were trying to kill me," said Antonio as he simulated a karate-chop to Abel's throat before Abel could answer. "There's a lot of trouble over in my country. They were dispatched in connection with that ... ah, I forgot to tell you: I'm Antonio Borgia. I'm the Prince of Valencia in Hispania."

"The Borgia family heir? Now that you mention it, I'd heard you were studying abroad in this city. That's you?" asked the inspector. The name recognition of the house of Prince Borgia was indeed great. Lentz nodded, outwardly unaffected, but with surprise in his eyes as he regarded the young man. "Understood. If this is a family matter, I won't investigate. But this place is still dangerous. For now, you both need to accompany me to headquarters. We won't harm you."

Lentz turned around and was about to take the reins of the street carriage.

"Um, inspector, may I say something?" requested Abel with desperate eyes.

"What's the matter, Father?" asked Lentz.

"I'm terribly sorry, but ... please raise both hands and kneel there," Abel ordered while pressing his gun into the policeman's forehead.

V

"What kind of joke is this, Father?" asked Lentz, frowning suspiciously while the gun remained thrust between his eyebrows.

"Stop it, Abel," Antonio demanded. "Regardless of whether it's for the sake of preserving secrecy, it would be bad to kill a policeman. Don't joke around."

"It certainly wouldn't end as a joke if this person were a real police inspector. All of you over there, please don't move!" ordered Abel with a straight face, his finger not budging from the trigger. "He's not a policeman, and those men with him aren't police officers, either. They're probably from Neue Vatican. Am I wrong?"

"No, you're not wrong," said the man as though his mask had been torn from his face. With the gun muzzle still stuck between his brows, the policeman's face changed completely. Warping one cheek into a grin, the solemn policeman quickly transformed into a disturbing fanatic. "Well, I'm surprised. I didn't think we'd be found out this quickly. As you say, I'm Father Günter Lentz of Neue Vatican. How did you know, Father Nightroad?"

"How did you know to call me Father Nightroad?" asked Abel.

Perhaps because he was acknowledging defeat, Lentz followed instructions and raised both arms over his head. "I misjudged you. An AX person of skill is indeed very great," said Lentz.

"No, I'm not that," Abel said.

The fake inspector grinned at Abel, who scratched his head in embarrassment. "But you don't follow through," he said.

"Eh?" Abel said, perplexed. His eyes grew round behind his glasses. For an instant, it looked as though Lentz's arm had disappeared. Abel noticed after it became impossible for him to move the

revolver's trigger.

"Craft Albion Works Company-made Model Fifty-one thirty-eight-caliber revolver 'Peacekeeper.' Nice gun," said Lentz, who had power and speed that far surpassed that of a typical human. Still firmly grasping the percussion revolver's trigger, he twisted his lips into a grin. "However, a revolver has a fatal flaw: You can't pull the trigger when the cylinder is fixed."

"Ugh!" Abel blurted out. His lips formed the shape of an impending scream, and his right arm strained to grip the handgun. A second later, his six-foot-plus body was flipped and hurled to the stone pavement. Magically, his handgun had been transferred from his hand to Lentz's.

"Wh-what is this?" asked Abel. Lentz had excellent physical technique, and the speed of his movements suggested that he either was a vampire or ... "Lentz, you've been t-tuned?"

"Correct answer," Lentz replied, turning the stolen handgun toward the priest's head and smirking maliciously. The wrist that peeked out from his glove was stained gray.

Tuned—he was a product of pre-Armageddon lost technology salvaged by the Vatican. The heightened power, due to administration of drugs and body-strengthening surgery, was said to rival that of vampires.

"I used to belong to a Vatican special infantry battalion, but I was too enthusiastic at my work, so it caused lawsuits. It was His Holiness Alfonso who saved me from being charged as a mass murderer," Lentz said.

With his gun still pointed at the priest on the ground, Lentz turned and faced Antonio, who stood waiting with his arms folded. The fake police officers had their guns drawn at the prince, who'd indicated his intention to surrender by raising his hands initially.

"You've made us wait a very long time, prince. Won't you tell us where the list is hidden?" asked Lentz.

VI

Cologne, an old university city, was surprisingly sophisticated for Germanics, which resembled a barbaric military nation. Because it was an inhabited city, places existed to fulfill people's desires. There weren't too many people who could spend their holidays solely reading and engaging in music appreciation.

The Black Forest was said to be a shop that represented the lower echelons of Cologne's population. Its sign read: "beer hall," but half the women hanging around the hall were professionals. Bedrooms were provided on the second floor for them to use for business, and the biggest casino in the city was in the shop's basement.

As soon as Father Lentz took one step into the shop, he wrinkled his nose. "This is hellish." The fake policemen who followed him had shed their uniforms and were wearing plain clothes. Unwilling to hide their displeasure, their faces silently reiterated Lentz's assessment. "To patronize a disgusting place like this in a traditional university city like Cologne of all places. Curse you! We were created to burn down and purify Sodoms like this," Lentz said angrily.

Having not felt entirely moved by the fortified soldier's pious speech, Antonio shrugged. "The owner of this shop is a friend I can trust. I got him to guard the list in the underground vault here, because it's probably the safest place in Cologne."

Antonio led Lentz, the Neue Vatican followers, and the silver-haired priest—who continued to endure the prodding of his capturers' guns. The devotees had wanted to kill Abel, but Lentz had stopped them.

"If he's from AX, he should have a lot of intelligence about Rome. Later, I'll get you to tell me all about how much they know about us, Father Nighthead," Lentz had said.

Abel bit his lip and didn't respond. His weapon had been taken away, and he was surrounded by strong enemies. Despite the fact that he was considered to be the highest talent in the Vatican, he couldn't come up with words in such a dire situation.

"The owner says he'll see you right away," Lentz said.

A stout middle-aged man who called himself the director walked out of the shop. From beneath heavy eyelids that were reminiscent of a pig's, he peered intensely at Antonio. "The owner jumped for joy when he heard you were here, Antonio. He'll spoil you plenty. Use the inside stairs." The director laughed unpleasantly and winked at Lentz. "Thank you for bringing Antonio. He hasn't responded to the owner's invitations at all. You'll probably get a lot of money."

"Yeah, I expect to get a lot of thanks," Lentz replied without looking directly at the director's face. He probably felt as though his faithful heart had been desecrated simply by opening his mouth. Were he more open-minded, he would have noticed that Antonio didn't try to make eye contact with the man, or the glimmer of understanding that was apparent in Abel's eyes as he was being dragged along.

The owner's room was the first room inside the underground casino. Beyond the two-way mirror that opened without a sound was a large but simply furnished office. Except for the twenty-plus men standing throughout the room holding handguns, it resembled the president's office at any big corporation.

"Welcome, Antonio." Seated at a desk the size of a bed was a large man whose face appeared as though it had been chiseled with a lump of rock. As he glared at Antonio's slender face, his thick lips spread into a smile. "It's been a long time. I'm very glad to meet you at last."

"Me too, Papa Zeppu," Antonio replied, scratching his head as if he were slightly embarrassed. "It's been a long time—about a month since the Eva incident?"

"Yeah. On the night before that woman left here, you—" said Papa Zeppu.

"I'm very sorry, but I'd prefer it if the two of you rekindled your friendship later," said Lentz as he wedged in between the two old friends. He folded his arms, showing no sign of amiability, and jutted out his jaw. "First, I'll get what I came for. I can't remain calm in a place like this. I'll take the list in the vault and say goodbye at once."

"List, is it?" said Papa Zeppu raising his thick eyebrows.

Lentz leaned in toward the burly man. "It belongs to this prince. That list—you have it, right?"

"Hey, be careful how you talk, youngster," warned Papa Zeppu.

As if cowering in response to their boss' anger, the underlings behind Papa Zeppu shoved their hands into their pockets.

"What about the list?" asked Papa Zeppu.

"Are you going to pretend you don't know? It's of no use to a nobody like you," said Lentz, shaking his head disapprovingly, unlike Zeppu, who didn't flinch an eyebrow. "It belongs to us. Hand it over at once!"

"Listen, youngster . . ." Zeppu's hand reached toward the fortified soldier's collar. As soon as his fat fingers grabbed Lentz's necktie, the emperor of the underworld bared his nicotine-stained teeth and growled. "I don't know what this shitty kid's been putting into your head, but that list is my treasure. No matter what happens, I have no intention of handing it over. If you understand, disappear at—
eek!"

Lentz tightly gripped the hand Zeppu had used to grab Lentz's necktie. Zeppu's bones made a nasty noise as they crumbled under Lentz's power, fortified by steroids and artificial protein.

"If you won't hand over the list, no matter what . . ." said Lentz as he crushed the screaming Zeppu's hand into powder and broke into a sadistic smile, "I'll take it by force!"

The gang members simultaneously pulled their handguns out of their pockets, prompting Lentz's devotees to raise their weapons.

The room itself was large, but as gunfire flashed and blood began to spray, the space proved to be too small for the thirty people inside it. The devotees were overwhelmingly outnumbered, but they didn't back down—they kept pulling their triggers without hesitation, despite seeing their associates fall one by one.

"Damned pig! You should fall into hell!" shouted Lentz. After snarling in annoyance, Lentz lifted Zeppu's body over his head and energetically hurled the uncontrollably screaming large man at the gang members.

When the gang members broke their strong stance, the fortified soldier-priest jumped over the desk and seized the inner vault. Spotting a thick file past the door he'd ripped off with uncanny strength, Lentz's face glowed. "This?" he asked, knowing that what he'd found undoubtedly would make His Holiness Alfonso happy. "Good, I've retrieved the list. Withdraw!" Lentz shouted to his subordinates, who already had taken out a considerable number of the enemies. It had cost painful sacrifices, but their reward would be paid in full if they had the list.

"Wh-what is this?" Lentz's face hardened as his eyes scanned the open file. "'Walter Schumacher—Amalie, April twentieth, two thousand.' What is this?" It's not the list! Lentz thought in horror. What he had in his possession was a list, but it wasn't the register of comrades that Alfonso had ordered him to retrieve. *This is a register of customers who frequent this filthy, satanic shop!* "Why this? The list—where in the world is the list? D-damn, I see!"

Lentz understood the situation at last. Hurriedly surveying the room, he caught sight of two human shadows trying to sneak out of the room, away from the confusion. One of the two shadows—the silver-haired priest—already had taken off his handcuffs and was holding his own percussion revolver that had fallen to the floor in the confusion.

"You! You planned this, Borgia!" Lentz bellowed before snatching a long sword from a suit of decorative armor standing in a corner of the room. Kicking the floor with a roar and activating his tuned leg strength, he took one step on the ceiling and jumped down like a wild beast directly in front of the young men who were about to

escape. "I won't forgive you, Borgia. I won't let you escape alive!"

The silver-haired priest stood facing the oncoming fanatic, and was being pushed forward by Antonio, who cowered as usual. "I really understand how you feel—that you want to kill him—but..." said Abel with complete sympathy, "I can't leave him in your hands. And Father Lentz, in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, I arrest you red-handed for the crimes of obstructing enforcement of holy duty and preparing and assembling dangerous weapons. I advise you to surrender quietly."

"Don't be stupid!" yelled Lentz. With an ear-splitting gust, the unsheathed sword revolved in the air. It was possible to instantly kill a priest or two possessing a fortified soldier's speed, but if Lentz were a normal person, the immense sword he had raised would have split the air and struck the top of Abel's head.

Blue and white sparks scattered to the sound of a high-pitched metallic screeching. The bullet Abel had fired the moment the sword had swung stopped the blade, in spite of the fact that the blade exceeded the speed of sound. Miraculously, its orbit was ruined, and the most damage it did was gouge a deep crack in the floor.

"Shahhh!" Lentz howled. Taking advantage of the sword rebounding off the floor, he swung it up diagonally, causing a few of the priest's unruly silver hairs to dance in the wind. Meanwhile, Abel cocked his gun while sliding backward.

"Just what I'd expect from an agent — but naive!" said Lentz.

The first attack had been a trap from the outset. Lentz didn't brandish the sword up diagonally but drew its hilt to his side. Using the power of his twisting hips, he brutally thrust the sword, hurling it toward the priest's face. "Perish in the name of God, you who ally with my enemies. I'll skewer you, agent!" yelled Lentz.

Prayer collided with prayer.

"God, please protect me. It's no use, Father Lentz," said Abel who didn't avoid the shining blade thrust at him. Instead, he revolved in

a large arc and kicked his foot, striking the flat of the blade.

Lentz lost his balance. His hips drifted in front of the rest of his body, pulled by the weight of the sword, before he felt the cold sensation of the gun muzzle on his shoulder.

"God have pity. Amen," said Abel.

No matter how much godlike speed he boasted about, Lentz had no means to avoid this. Five bullets shot from point-blank range and ate through Lentz's shoulder, passing through to his back. Bleeding and screaming, the fortified soldier struck the floor.

"Damn you, Father!" yelled a devotee.

A few of the unharmed devotees could've pointed their guns toward Abel, but the moment was gone.

"All of you there, don't move!" said a voice.

Suddenly, about ten priests carrying guns kicked down the door and rushed in.

"So, where was that list being safeguarded in the end?" asked Professor as he shrugged off the grumbling coming from Abel, who stood beside him in the hall to the chief's office. "If it wasn't in that vault, where was it hidden?"

"That's a joke," said Abel, making a face as if he'd chewed two or three bugs at once. A small bandage stuck to his cheek, he already had been mistaken for the enemy by Caterina's recovery team that had charged into the casino. It definitely had been unwise not to wear a cassock. Despite that, Abel had been able to keep Antonio safe and also secure the Neue Vatican devotees, from Lentz on down. Maybe he should look past being slightly beaten up. "Antonio—I mean, Prince Borgia—burned the list long ago because he

memorized all its contents. Really, he made a fool out of me until the end," said Abel.

"That's a neat trick. That way, the cardinals won't be able to treat him negligently hereafter," said Professor as he stroked his long chin and shook his head as if very impressed. If he'd left the list as it was, it would be the end if it were confiscated. However, it would be safe if he had transferred it to the inside of his own head, and he could get VIP treatment from Rome for however long. Yes, it's a good trick, just what I'd expect from one called the genius of Cologne University."

"Eh? He's called that?" asked Abel.

"What, you didn't know?" asked Professor. As soon as he removed his unlit pipe from his mouth, Professor raised his eyebrows. "Prince Antonio Borgia of Valencia is a genius who earned seven doctorates by the age of twenty-three—enough for my university to use him as a political science department professor."

"Him?" asked Abel, who felt the man didn't match his outward appearance. *I thought he was merely—no, in a certain sense, less than—a frivolous youth. Still, it wouldn't be advisable to have anything to do with him after this; after we safely arrive in Rome, I won't see him anymore. I don't think I want to see him.* "Yeah, now that you mention it, Professor, how did your work go in Hispania? Weren't you trying to expose a slave trade syndicate?"



"It was an extremely boring assignment. The matter took so much time, and it wasn't interesting at all," Professor said, tightening his face as if to snidely say, "Thanks for asking." "I used a simple trick, making it possible to analyze the matter in ten minutes with very rudimentary logic. But it's already July, right? The season completely overlapped with end-of-year exams. That was terrible—making up exam questions, grading reports ... I didn't sleep for three days."

With the pipe still stuck between his lips, Professor swallowed a genuine yawn. In accordance with his name, the agent "Professor" was, in fact, a regular professor at Rome University, and he held lectures in the departments of literature and science.

"Really, I can't stand it! If it's going to be like this, it would be more relaxing to take on more slave dealers. Leaving aside that they sell people, they don't sell collections of sample answers before the exams, and they don't submit classical poetry reports on how to boil delicious pasta," said Professor. "I envy you getting to escort that genius Antonio Borgia, Nightroad! No doubt you enjoyed refined and scholarly conversations?"

Abel stared in silence, thinking to himself, *Well, fine. I'll never see that dandy again. Right about now, he's probably loafing as much as he likes on his way home. I don't mind, as long as he's happy someplace far away.*

With an intense look on his face, Abel knocked on the door of the chief's office. "It's Abel Nightroad. You sent for me."

"Please come in," answered Caterina.

After hearing his superior's voice, Abel opened the door. On the other side of the office, the most beautiful cardinal in the world was smiling mischievously. "Ah, you've gotten a lot better looking, Father Nightroad. Your business trip to Cologne seems to have been a big deal," said Caterina.

"Yes, in all kinds of ways," Abel replied, twisting his lips and gently scratching his head. "The most troublesome wasn't the bunch from

Neue Vatican—it was the person I'd been escorting. I had a really hard time. Caterina, I'm begging you—next time you want me to transport hazardous materials, please tell me so frankly."

"By 'hazardous materials,' do you mean Prince Borgia? According to the prince's story, you were a very lively combo. Isn't that so? Let's see, 'sole friend,' was it?" asked Caterina.

"Sole friend?" asked Abel. The priest appeared as though he'd learned the end of the world was near. "Who said such a pleasant thing in their sleep? In the first place, he and I—"

"We're battle friends who shared life and death, right, Abel?" interrupted Antonio in a frivolous voice from the sofa, which Abel had thought was empty.

Abel refocused his eyeballs, which were about to burst through his glasses, toward the sofa, and completely froze.

"You already were acquainted with Father Nightroad. Let me introduce you to Professor," said Caterina. While gazing happily at the stunned Abel, Caterina gestured toward the other visitor sitting on the sofa in front of the desk. "This is a new priest who will be in service at the Vatican from this day forward."

"I'm Antonio Borgia. Pleased to meet you, my elder," said Antonio, beaming. The young man stood up from the sofa, extending his hand.

Judas Priest

Verily I say unto you, that one of you shall betray me.

—Matthew 26:21

I

The bullet had pierced the figure in the black coat's stomach, but that didn't succeed in slowing the figure's charge. With its gas mask flashing, it approached at an otherworldly pace.

"It can't be! I hit it six times!" cried Abel, gripping the familiar percussion revolver in his hand as the former city of Prague and the dry bed of the Moldau River rapidly zoomed through his mind. Under the afternoon sunlight, the giant in the ominous black coat brandished a war hammer as if it didn't feel any pain whatsoever. It was hard to believe that figure, not unlike a deity, had six rounds in its stomach.

This wasn't the only black coat present. The black coat that had been shot through both knees by Tres' M-13 and the one whose shoulder had been broken by Professor's sword cane also were there. All six of the black coats who should've fallen were standing calmly. Abel couldn't see their expressions because they wore their helmets and gas masks low over their eyes, but they looked as though they didn't feel any pain.

"A-are they wearing bulletproof vests or something, Professor Wordsworth?" asked Abel.

"No, they're zombies, Nightroad. Look—watch this," replied Professor. With a twist of his wrist, he used a stick to strike off the nearest gas mask, revealing the face of a dead person beneath it. The eyes and mouth of its waxen face were sewn together with thick thread, and bulky machinery was buried in its head.

Horrified, Abel stammered, "Th-this is...?"

"By treating the corpses with electricity, they seem to have developed battle machines. I've read papers on the plans and the theory behind it. They're called Auto Jagers. However, I didn't think

anybody actually would build them," Professor replied.

Seeing a shadow leap over Professor's head and a corpse brandish its weapon, Abel yelled, "P-professor, look out!"

Professor didn't flinch at Abel's hasty warning. The middle-aged man, who looked as though he were going out to a party in his silk hat and morning suit, nimbly raised his stick. Pointing its tip at the Auto Jagers head, he twisted his grip. "Yes, it's utterly deplorable. Misusing science in this kind of way is blasphemous." The flames that shot out of the tip of his stick released power that rivaled a howitzer.

Receiving the ethylene and oxygen mixture more than two thousand times, the corpse—its war hammer still brandished—carbonized from the neck up, fell with a thud, and didn't move again.

"Blow off their heads—they're already corpses. I doubt they'll complain no matter how many times they die," Professor exclaimed.

"That's true. Did you hear, Tres?" asked Abel over his shoulder.

A moment later, Abel's call was answered by frenzied gunfire as the handguns of two young men standing beside a limousine stopped halfway up an embankment roared.

"Positive. Don't leave the car, you two—even if we crush the enemy," ordered Tres. Despite it being early autumn, Father Tres Iqus was wrapped in a thick, long coat down to his heels and wore mirror shades. "It's meaningless if they kill the one we're escorting," he pointed out without showing any emotion.

Two shadows were visible inside the limousine, the engine of which had been shot through the hood. One was a blonde beauty, stylishly attired in a silk blouse and men's trousers, and the other was a skinny boy whose dull, pimply face had been warped by terror. If people from the Vatican had looked at their faces, they might have died of shock.

On this dry, lonely riverbed outside Prague, the two highest-ranking

people in the Vatican were accompanied by only three guards. Said guards were protecting Minister of Foreign Affairs Cardinal Caterina Sforza and her half brother, the three hundred ninety-ninth Pope, Alessandro XVIII.

"Wasn't traveling incognito supposed to be top secret?" asked Abel, glancing at the dauntless beauty who didn't seem to notice the enemy closing in and the terrified Pope who clung to his older sister. "Inside information must have been leaked again for us to have been attacked so suddenly like this!"

"Abel—above!" shouted Professor.

Abel shifted his gaze to where Professor had pointed, noticing a floating shadow outlined by the afternoon sun behind it. By the time he confirmed that the shadow was an Auto Jager that had jumped, the corpse was swinging down its weapon over the dazed priest's head.

"Get down, Abel!" Professor yelled as blue light burst forth.

The flames flashed like a demon sword, blowing off the dead soldier's head. The war hammer grazed Abel's head, but it stopped moving after gouging the ground.

"You saved me, Professor!" Abel exclaimed, practically blubbing as he clung to the middle-aged man wielding the stick. "Isn't it amazing? I've got a better opinion of you! You always know such useful things. It's not incomprehensible junk after all!"

"Yes, before the mighty power of science, this was merely manganese dioxide with too much hydrogen peroxide," said Professor, twirling his pipe pretentiously and gazing upward blankly.

"I don't really understand, but it's cool! If it's going to go this well, please get rid of the rest of them, too!" Abel said.

"Fine. This is the power of science!" Professor replied. Gracefully arching one eyebrow, Professor pointed the tip of the stick at the enemy again. "Hmm?" The same eyebrow suddenly lowered.

Although he'd pushed the switch, the nozzle remained silent and failed to respond.

"Wh-what's the matter? Something wrong?" asked Abel. "Oh no. It seems to be out of fuel. Now that I think about it, I forgot to replenish the fuel before I left," said Professor. "Wh-what?" Abel exclaimed.

The corpses appeared to have figured out that Professor had lost his means to counterattack, suddenly inching closer after having kept a cautious distance.

"Wah! They're attacking, Professor! Don't you have any other great power of science?" Abel shrieked.

"The science of humanity is powerless before the miracle of the great universe," replied Professor.

"That's not what you said before!" Abel retorted. One after the next, massive shadows danced over the priests' heads, charging toward the car with strength that belied their huge frames.

"O-oh, no — Tres! The enemy's over there!" warned Abel. "Roger," Tres affirmed as both his hands spewed fire. The corpses' heads rapidly disintegrated into clouds of crimson. Like a hunting dog protecting its master from a pack of wolves, Gunslinger let his gun muzzles glide toward one more of the living dead. "Tres, behind you!" cried Abel.

Tres heeded Abel's warning. Using his right hand, he turned his gun muzzle behind him, blowing apart a different zombie that unexpectedly had snuck up on him. The war hammer revolved and struck his right shoulder, causing subcutaneous circulation drugs to burst forth like fresh blood, quickly dying his leather coat red.

The two people inside the car remained the corpse's targets. Without regarding Tres as he staggered, the last corpse swung down its war hammer, aiming at the idle limousine beneath it. If the car took a direct hit, the people inside wouldn't survive.

"Oh no!" Professor shouted, flinging off his silk hat.

As the war hammer thrust downward, it howled like the victory shout of a death god. But the moment the three priests were imagining the two people in the limousine being crushed to a pulp, the war hammer flew off as though it had hit an invisible shield, making a strange noise as it shattered.

"Wh-what happened?" asked Abel, wondering if God's divine protection had descended on the siblings.

It was too soon to give thanks. Knowing that it had lost its weapon, the Auto Jager remained tense, with its fist raised over its head. This time, it probably intended to attack empty-handed; but before it could bring down its fist, its huge body was blown backward. After it fell head over heels and hit the ground, the black coat's chest was gouged deeply as if struck by something. The attack wasn't Tres' doing, nor was it the work of Abel, who was holding his breath—nor was it Professor, frowning suspiciously.

Initially unable to correct its damage, the Auto Jager raised its huge body and jumped violently as if it were performing a bizarre dance; then, it spun and stumbled. But who—or what—had attacked the zombie? Its loglike arms twirled in every direction and shattered, and its gas mask cracked as if it had been torched before breaking apart and scattering. Yet its attacker was still completely invisible.

"It can't be ... Know Faith?" Abel speculated.

As if to provide a response to Abel's excitement, a faint sound of exhalation emanated from the air. A second later, the Auto Jager's head exploded more dramatically than it did after Tres had fired at it.

"God, please have mercy on these people. Their bones are afraid and their souls tremble," said a voice.

It was as though the prayer that echoed from the air had been heard. The torso gushing fresh blood slowly knelt down and fell over in exhaustion. However, everyone's gaze focused not on the fallen corpse but on the man who suddenly appeared amid the shower of blood. Where in the world had he come from? He had a thin, clean-shaven face, and his green eyes were filled with calm,

but at the same time, bottomless sadness.

"It was you, Know Faith— Father Vaclav Havel!" Abel exclaimed.

Havel continued his prayer for the dead: "Please regard them with love, and guide their wandering souls to the underworld. Amen. Yeah, it's been about a year, Abel." As soon as he finished lamenting those who died twice, the thin priest — the highest AX agent Know Faith — turned around, smiling serenely.

II

It was only six o'clock in the evening. With the long hand pointing to heaven and the short hand pointing to hell, the death god that haunted the government office's astronomical clock began to chime the hour. At the same time, the twelve disciples of Christ began their busy march from the window that opened next to Michael smiling on the dial plate. It also was the end of the day in Prague, the capital of the Duchy of Bohemia, famous for being the "city of one hundred towers."

"Somebody inside the Department of Foreign Affairs is colluding with Neue Vatican," Caterina announced.

An old person missing a leg performed a puppet show on the stone square of the governmental office plaza, which had been dyed red by the evening sun. The show looked as though it were reenacting the battle between the church army and the heretics' army that had occurred in the same area two years ago. As she gazed through the teahouse's window at the sight of soldiers on both sides being brutally wounded and killed, Caterina crossed her legs, looking troubled. "Is that what you wanted to say, Professor Wordsworth?"

"Yes. All kinds of circumstantial proof suggests that," Doctor William Walter Wordsworth answered respectfully as the steam from his tea misted his chin. His long face, characteristic of Albion nobility, was expressionless. "His Holiness' current trip to Bohemia was planned a year ago. However, today's incognito inspection of Prague was decided on yesterday by Your Eminence's wishes. Very few people knew about it, except for us escort agents, so if there's a traitor in the core of the Department of Foreign Affairs—"

"That would explain why our three months' worth of activity investigating Neue Vatican have ended up in vain, right?" Caterina asked, completing Professor's thought.

"Exactly," Professor answered.

"I think your analysis is correct; however, it's an unpleasant reality," Caterina said bitterly as she furrowed her well-defined eyebrows.

Three months ago, they'd detected the existence of Neue Vatican, the heretical association led by her uncle, former Archbishop of Cologne Alfonso d'Este. Since that time, Alfonso and the other key members of Neue Vatican had continuously covered traces of their whereabouts. Although they'd succeeded in getting their hands on the list of Neue Vatican members two months earlier and had exposed their hideouts everywhere, they had made little progress beyond that. But that, too, was understandable if they considered that there was a person leaking investigation information to their friends.

The more pressing problem was the memorial service for the Bohemia War dead, scheduled for the following day in the public church. Would the Neue Vatican faction try to interfere with that, too? The event was too near to suspend the Pope's attendance. All they could do was maintain their plans while keeping the risk in mind.

Alessandro had been silent from the moment he'd entered the teahouse. Suddenly, he lifted his pimply face, surveying the inside of the shop like a frightened herbivore. "C-could the fact that we're here be f-found out by the h-heretics?" asked Alessandro in a scratchy, stammering voice. "H-hadn't we b-better return to the inn at once? I-if we're attacked again . . ."

Her thoughts interrupted, Caterina stared gravely at her younger brother. A rare hint of irritation illuminated her beautiful face, which rarely expressed emotion. "Please calm down, Alec. If you get edgy from this much, you're not fit to be Pope," she said. "People have tried to kill me once or twice, but we still ventured out into the city. Take the time to study how the common people live with your own eyes. If you don't, there's no point in being incognito, right?"

Alessandro's eyes were filled with dread. "B-but, I-I—"

"I'm not listening to 'but,'" Caterina said assertively.

Surprised to have been scolded in such a severe tone, the boy Pope's eyes were wet as though he were about to burst into tears. Caterina, having assumed her best elder sister stance, had gazed coldly at her younger brother with an intimidating furrowed brow. To adopt such a serious demeanor was unusual for her.

"Um, Caterina?" Abel said.

"What is it, Father Nightroad?" asked Caterina, staring blankly at her subordinate who spoke to her with a face that suggested he had one foot in the grave.

Abel shuddered as if he was frightened by Caterina's icy eyes, but he gathered what little courage he had. He broke into a thin smile to complement his conciliatory tone. "Heh heh. I-it's nice weather today, isn't it?"

"If you're going to make stupid comments, please do it someplace else, Abel," Caterina retorted.

"Sorry," Abel said regretfully. Crushed, he sipped the contents of his teacup as his eyes grew teary. Next to him, Professor held his forehead.

Suddenly, a calm, quiet voice spoke to them. "It is written in the Book of Matthew that when the first Pope, Saint Peter, met Christ, he was frightened by Christ's miracles and merely trembled," said Know Faith.

Havel fearlessly peered into Caterina's eyes, and having kept silent at one corner of the table until then, opened his mouth and said earnestly, "I'm sorry, but I think Your Eminence's opinion is wrong. It is right for His Holiness to feel afraid. Isn't the problem how he conquers his fear?"

"Vaclav, in spite of what you believe, this boy is always like this," Caterina replied, hardening her features as though her soul were made of ice. "He searches for excuses at the slightest sign of trouble and proceeds to try to run away. If he keeps this up, it's unlikely

that he'll be fit for Pope hereafter. Thank you for your advice, but meddling doesn't help. I want him to become stronger."

"If so, isn't it Your Eminence's duty to teach His Holiness how he can confront his fears without running away?" asked Havel.

If he were Abel, he would have given up long ago and fled back to Rome, but Father Havel showed absolutely no sign of fear. He calmly shifted his eyes to the Pope—who still appeared as though he wanted to cry—before once more glancing back at his displeased superior's beautiful face.

"Even wild birds teach their fledgling chicks how to fly. Isn't it also Your Eminence's duty to teach your younger brother how to be Pope? To neglect to do that and simply announce that he's the Pope is like throwing a chick who's never been taught to fly down from the branch," Havel declared.

"I'm aware of that without having been told by you. My younger brother already is Pope, so there's no time for leisurely talking about such things. He's been enthroned and should be prepared for that much," Caterina replied firmly.

"I-I didn't b-b-become Pope because I wanted to," Alessandro chimed in. As he struggled to stammer, tears began to trickle down his cheeks. Wedged between the cardinal and priest talking to each other, the boy hung his head so low that it seemed as if his neck would snap. "S-sister, didn't you d-decide to make me Pope? Although I-I didn't want to be P-pope, my s-s-sister and b-b-brother forced me," Alessandro said in a low voice, his face beet red.

"Forced? You were chosen to be Pope by a legitimate papal election," insisted Caterina. She crossed and uncrossed her legs, peering at her younger brother far more dismayed than she had been previously. "That is, the consensus of the cardinals' opinions decided that you were a suitable person to be Pope. Nobody forced you. What are you misunderstanding?"

"E-e-everybody says so," said Alessandro, practically panting. His frail, spineless-looking body shook incessantly. "Everybody says that I'm my s-sister's and b-brother's puppet. Y-you r-really think so, too,

don't you, sister? You think I-I'm a poorly made puppet— that you r-really don't need s-s-such a shameful little brother."

"Alec!" shouted Caterina, revealing a side uncharacteristic of her usually elegant nature. Her slender hand whipped toward her younger brother's cheek as Abel quickly stood up.

"You can't, Caterina!" Abel proclaimed, but the silver-haired priest didn't react in time.

Amid the congealed silence, Know Faith's gentle voice echoed: "You shouldn't do it, Your Eminence." Havel shielded the boy who'd shut his eyes tightly and caught the cardinal's hand in his fist. "You really can't make a person submit or change his mind through violence. Regardless of whether it's for the sake of cultural study, His Holiness is frightened by what's transpired, so it's pointless to have him stay longer than this. We should return to the inn today."

A spark that was neither anger nor relief brightened Caterina's stunning eyes. Still observing her subordinate's gaunt face, she opened and closed her thin lips several times as if she wanted to say something, and then she coughed before finally uttering, "We're going back." The slender young woman stood up and brushed off her sleeves. "Professor Wordsworth, contact the inn. Tell them to meet us on the way. Father Tres, please drive. Father Abel, you settle the bill here."

"Affirmative," replied Tres.

"Yes, yes—right away. Say, Professor, this goes on the expense account, right?" asked Abel.

"I don't know," Professor responded.

As the three priests took care of their respective duties, all feeling a sense of relief, the cardinal went outside. Watching her exit, Abel whispered to the only priest who hadn't been ordered to work. "Thank you, Vaclav."

"It was nothing," Havel replied with a smile on his sober but kind face. "I only said what I believed to be right—it was nothing."

Having glanced down to where the shy, pimple-faced boy was tugging at this sleeve, Havel asked, "What's the matter, Your Holiness?"

"I-I wanted to th-thank you," said Alessandro. His feeble-looking face grew more and more red as he sheepishly faced the priests. "Th-thank you, Vaclav f-for protecting me."

"There's no need for thanks," the bearded priest replied, shaking his head. "I was merely carrying out my duty."

"B-but I was g-glad, because I never th-th-thought s-somebody would p-protect a useless person like m-m-me," said Alessandro, drawn in to the priest's eyes. "I-I-I really am useless. No matter what I do, my s-studies and e-exercises are no use. My sister is s-so smart and b-beautiful, but when it comes to m-m-me ..."

Alessandro wasn't that experienced in getting other people to listen to him. The boy's speech kept getting faster as if he were afraid that they'd stop paying attention to him. Havel continued to listen patiently, although Alessandro was extremely hard to understand.

"I'm h-h-her younger brother, s-so wh-why am I like this?" Alessandro muttered. "E-even now, I'm very afraid. Just hearing that my 1-life is in d-danger, I'm so a-afraid that my heart..."

"I will protect you," Havel assured him, making the sign of the cross. "I certainly will protect you. As long as I, Havel, am by your side, not a hair on Your Holiness' head will be harmed."



For the first time that day, the boy's face brightened in response to the reassuring words. "R-r-really?" gasped Alessandro.

"I swear to God. In exchange for my protection, though, I have one request for Your Holiness," Havel said.

"R-r-request?" Alessandro asked. This was the first time in his life he'd experienced somebody asking him for a favor. Leaning forward eagerly, he asked, "Wh-wh-what is it?"

"Please, from here on out, refrain from calling yourself such things as 'poorly made puppet' and 'disgraceful,'" said Havel, who nearly equaled Abel in height. Stooping over, the priest put his eyes level with the boy's. "When people ridicule themselves, they have given up on both growth and development. When that happens, they forfeit their future—they live only to ridicule this world. Your Holiness, please don't be that kind of coward. That is my request."

The evening sun was setting, and the surface of the Vltava River shone gold beyond the group of towers. As the light glared against one side of his face, turning it red, Havel grasped the boy's hand. "I swear that I'll protect Your Holiness. I won't let anybody harm you. Therefore, you also must promise, Your Holiness, that you won't talk like that again."

"Y-y-yes," Alessandro replied. Regardless of whether he really understood what Havel had asked of him, the boy nodded enthusiastically. "I p-promise."

"Please be a good Pope, Your Holiness," Havel said.

All of a sudden, Alessandro's sister's voice called him from outside: "Alec, what are you doing? The car is here. Please get in."

"I-I have to go," said Alessandro, gripping Havel's hand as if he still hadn't said enough. "P-please talk to me a-a-again, Vaclav."

"Yes, gladly," Havel replied.

Watching the Pope hurriedly leave the shop after he was beckoned again, Abel said, "You're as virtuous as always, Vaclav. The fact that

His Holiness was so happy to talk—"

"It's not virtue, Abel," said Havel with a reserved smile. "I'm not virtuous. What His Holiness chooses to do is of his own accord. If I can have some influence on him, then ..."

"Then . . . ?" Abel asked curiously as a waiter came up to hand him the bill. "Let's see, how much? Wow, what is this? Aren't there two too many zeroes?"

Distracted and confused by the number written on the bill, Abel completely forgot what he'd been talking about with his comrade. He would absolutely come to regret that fact later on.

III

"Well, it was a nice ceremony," said Archbishop Chapek, sitting in the seat across from the Pope, the cardinal, and Abel. He smiled in satisfaction because the memorial service in Saint Vito's Cathedral had ended without any hindrances.

Assisted by his sister the cardinal, the Pope had completed the memorial service for the soldiers who'd died fighting the heretics two years ago. The communion service for the sponsors, the Duke and Duchess of Bohemia, their daughter, and the women of the Duke Ribush family—"the emeralds of Prague," who gathered national popularity—also ended without any problems. The Duke of Bohemia's speech was still going on in the cathedral, but the Pope, the cardinal, and the silver-haired priest who was escorting them had returned to the archbishop's mansion, where they were lodging. It had been announced at the ceremony that the Pope had not been feeling well, but that obviously had been an attempt at preventing a repeat of the previous day's attack.

"With this, the souls of the lords and knights who died in battle will be at peace. Good, good," said the archbishop.

"That also was due to your meticulous preparations, archbishop," Caterina said.

During the ceremony, the guest of honor, Pope Alessandro, had moved the hood of his vestments down low over his eyes and hadn't removed it upon entering the carriage. The cardinal, seated next to the archbishop, thanked him on behalf of the painfully shy boy Pope. "I imagine it must have been difficult to make the necessary arrangements, but everything was done well and without omission, Archbishop Chapek," Caterina said before smiling at the middle-aged and bald yet impressive figurehead. As she gazed at the scenery passing by outside the horse carriage, she asked suspiciously, "Isn't this the wrong way, archbishop?"

The cathedral where the ceremony was held was located on the site of Prague Castle, and the archbishop's mansion where the Pope's entourage was lodging was to the right of the castle's front gate. When she realized that she was seeing the tower of the archbishop's mansion from the left side of the carriage, Caterina asked, "The lodgings are in that building, aren't they? Is this really the right way?"

"Of course it is," replied the archbishop with a kind smile. "Honestly, a certain person said he must meet with His Holiness and Your Eminence. We'll go there before we go to the lodgings."

"A certain person?" said Caterina, who was rather annoyed that the archbishop had rudely decided to take the detour without consultation. "Who is it? Somebody I know?"

"Yes, somebody well known to Your Eminence," replied the archbishop. Suddenly, his face—which had been the portrait of sincerity—transformed into something entirely different, beginning with his thick lips, which warped into an evil smirk. "Because he's a blood relative of yours; His Holiness Alfonso is the only true Pope."

"*His Holiness* Alfonso?" Caterina exclaimed, taken aback that the archbishop had addressed Alfonso in that manner. "Archbishop, you can't be from Neue Vatican!"

All of a sudden, ominous shadows jumped out of the thick foliage and scurried to the left and right of the horse carriage as it halted.

"Auto Jagers!" Caterina cried as soon as she saw the group of four figures donning black coats and gas masks.

"I'd prefer it if you didn't move, Your Eminence. It's not my intention to handle you roughly," the archbishop grinned as he gripped a small pistol, aiming it at the Pope. "It is His Holiness Alfonso's wish that you and Alessandro be brought to him alive. Please be still. If you don't, I can't guarantee that you'll live."

"I never thought the hand of Neue Vatican would reach the level of archbishop," Caterina gasped, covering her beautiful face with her slender hands and groaning powerlessly.

"It's a pity, Your Eminence. Although you arranged for four agents, you brought only one of them with you at this critical time," the archbishop laughed. He switched the aim of his gun muzzle from the Pope to the priest, who'd been fumbling in his pockets. "Sorry, Father Nightroad, this is the end for you."

The archbishop laughed caustically and pulled the trigger. The gun muzzle aimed between Abel's eyebrows made a faint sound and spat fire. "*Wh-what?*" the archbishop exclaimed.

It wasn't Abel whose eyes bugged out in pain over being shot—it was Chapek. "What are you . . . ?" The archbishop struggled to speak. His hand and handgun suddenly had been overpowered by the mighty grip of the weak boy Pope.

"Please hold the archbishop! I'll go take care of those zombies out there!" shouted Abel. He drew the percussion revolver from his pocket, but the archbishop was so shocked that he didn't notice the Auto Jagers blowing apart, their heads transforming into plasma.

As he removed the gun from Chapek's hand, the robed Pope informed the cardinal: "I've s-secured the a-a-archbishop, Duchess of Milan. P-please give me my next orders."

"For now, return your voice to normal. That, and you can put your hood back, Father Tres," Caterina instructed.

"R-r-roger," Tres replied. The voice that could be heard from under the hood mechanically changed its tone to match that of another person. The hood he threw back revealed a somewhat expressionless but handsome face, incomparable to that of the boy Pope.

Wearing a quizzical expression, the archbishop asked, "T-this guy is an agent? That's crazy! Then, the Pope—"

"He's a dummy. It's a classic method, but it was effective this time. Incidentally, we hid the real one in a hotel in the city. That's how things are, so give up, Archbishop Chapek," Caterina barked in a tone that was as sharp as a shard of ice. "We've suspected you since the attack the other day, because you were one of the few people

who knew about our plans to travel incognito."

Caterina had found it difficult to believe that someone in a position as high as archbishop had been leaking information. They urgently needed to hide Chapek's arrest. As soon as they brought him to Rome, they would have to interrogate him severely and make him name the other traitors. It was a bitter but unavoidable eventuality that they would suspect his relatives.

"Are you okay, Caterina?" asked Abel, peeking in. "You look sort of pale. Are you tired?"

"Ahhh, no. I'm okay . . . perhaps slightly disheartened," Caterina replied. She coughed lightly and then gave a semisweet smile. "I've been under stress, wondering when we'd be attacked again. After all, I'm not fit for a crime scene."

"See, I told you to leave the hard work to us," Abel said self-importantly. "It isn't that healthy. You should let us deal with the crime scenes."

"Sorry, but I wanted to do something myself this time. Besides, the enemy didn't suspect Father Tres because I was here, right? I wasn't completely useless," Caterina said in attempt to justify her worth. "As for the result, nobody was hurt, so that's good, isn't it?"

"However, there was no need to risk danger, Duchess of Milan," Tres added sharply, discontent to have used his master as bait. "Although we succeeded, the operation was too risky, which is something I can never back."

Wiping her mouth with a handkerchief, Caterina mumbled absently: "Alec ... a long time ago, he wasn't that weak a child." Whether consciously or unconsciously, her line of sight was fixed on the corner of the city where the real Alessandro was hidden. This time, the voice of the cardinal who was nicknamed "Iron Woman" was quivering. "Certainly, he's always been a little weak-spirited, but it's only since he became Pope that it's gotten to be so extreme. It was right about then that his stammering and shyness became severe. They say stammering is related to self-consciousness." Caterina sighed deeply in front of her silent subordinates. "I didn't want to

be Pope'—I think what he said was certainly true. I forced that unwilling child to be a candidate for Pope."

The battle over the successor to Pope Gregorio XXX, who'd died suddenly five years prior, had been exceptionally severe. In addition to the qualified cardinals of noble birth, Gregorio's younger brother, the sharp and able cardinal leader Alfonso d'Este, called "Il Ruinante," had nominated himself as a successor candidate.

Francesco, who was the illegitimate son born to the previous Pope and a lower-class knight's wife, and Caterina, who was female, couldn't possibly match the cardinals who had powerful uncles or who were noble-born. Therefore, they racked their brains, deciding to bet on the final trump card. Although he was only ten years old, they nominated Alessandro, whose mother belonged to the oldest noble family in Rome, to be Pope. As a result, the brother and sister who'd won the bet supported the new Pope and came to grasp the actual power of the Vatican.

Caterina's choice had been absolutely correct. If they hadn't defeated their uncle at that point, she would've gone through an entire lifetime without occupying the center of the Vatican. That became her pretext for having to grasp power by any means. Even now, she could say with confidence that her choice had been right. Only, she had committed a sin: the sin of offering her little brother as a sacrifice on the altar of power for her own ideals.

"I was the one who did a thing like that to that child. Therefore, I can't help how much I'm detested or hated. I have to protect him at all times—that's my responsibility. But this time, I wanted to do something myself. Although, as a result, I caused you trouble," Caterina said.

"Well, the end result was all right, isn't that so, Tres?" asked

Abel, deliberately smiling as though nothing was bothering him.

"Affirmative," replied Tres. It was hard to tell how serious he was because he didn't show any emotion or gesture much, except for a nod.

"Well, once we've restrained the archbishop, shall we go see His Holiness? I feel secure because Vaclav and Professor are by his side, but ..." said Abel.

Caterina peered suspiciously at her subordinate, whose smile had withered away during his speech. "What's wrong, Father Abel?" "Um, what did this guy say a little while ago?" asked Abel. "Huh?" Caterina's eyebrows moved together, but Abel didn't notice because he was staring intently into the face of the archbishop they'd just captured.

"You said, 'Although you brought four agents . . .' How did you know there were four agents, including us?" asked Abel.

Seeing Chapek quickly avert his eyes when questioned, Caterina finally understood what Abel was trying to say: "four"— namely, Abel, Gunslinger, Professor, and Know Faith. But the only people who knew that Know Faith had arrived in Prague, other than the three people present, were Alessandro and Havel. How could he have known that?

"This man is a decoy?" asked Caterina. Abel went pale. "You two take care of the archbishop—I'm going ahead!" he said before making a hasty exit.

IV

"How about some tea, you two?" asked Havel. "Th-th-thank you, Vaclav," Alessandro replied, smiling happily as he took the cup, which gave off a strong aroma.

Meanwhile, Professor, who'd been silently glaring at a sheaf of documents with a red pen in one hand for a while, didn't look up.

"How about it, William?" asked Havel.

"Hmm? Yeah, thanks," answered Professor, quickly grabbing the piping hot cup. He'd been fervently grading university papers ever since arriving at the cheap hotel in the squalid outskirts of town.

"Oh dear, you never change, William," Havel said. Showing no signs that his feelings had been hurt, Havel smiled wryly, shaking his head at the boy. "He's been like this for a long time. Please don't mind him."

"H-h-have you known each other long?" asked Alessandro as he cocked his head slightly, carefully letting the contents of his cup cool. "You seem to g-get along v-very well."

"Yes. When the three of us—William, Abel, and I—first met... well, it's nearly ten years ago now. We met when AX didn't yet exist," said Havel, wearing a distant expression. "William, Abel, and Kate are still my acquaintances."

"Wh-why do y-you work for my sister?" inquired Alessandro.

"Originally, I was with the Bureau of Inquisition, but my religious opinions clashed with my superiors at that time. There, I was picked up amid all kinds of unsavory things happening, but at the time, your sister had entered the world of the church. Although I'm unworthy, I've worked for her since that time," Havel explained.

A brash voice suddenly interrupted: "What do you mean, 'unworthy'? You're the highest talent in AX," Professor said, wearing a devious smile.

"Hey, William. Have you finished grading yet?" asked Havel.

"No, there's still half to go. Oh dear, when it comes to students lately ... Anyway, you shouldn't be fooled, Your Holiness. Vaclav here is the strongest and highest agent in AX. He's the person your sister relies upon the most," Professor replied.

Slightly embarrassed, Havel said, "William, please stop telling lies. I'm really not—"

"It's offensive to be too modest, Know Faith," Professor interjected as he lazily gnawed on his pipe. "The remote eastern regions like Bohemia and Istavan have all kinds of political troubles and, traditionally, a great amount of disorder. Aren't you always the one that Her Eminence decides to send to address the turbulence there?"

"That's simply because I was born near here," replied Havel.

"Yes, you were born in Brno . . . Now that you mention it, how did your work go? What happened with the missile stolen from Assisi?" asked Professor.

A month ago, an incident had occurred where an experimental missile had been stolen from the Vatican air force base in Assisi. According to the investigation bureau, the stolen missile had been taken to Brno, but the bureau didn't know where it had gone afterward. It was Havel who'd continued that investigation.

"A large missile ... I've heard a rumor that it was a city attack weapon, but . . . ahh, excuse me," Professor said, swallowing the crude yawn that swelled up while he was speaking. He shook his shoulders, trying to rattle himself from his state of drowsiness. "Is the air bad? I've gotten a little sleepy."

"Has your fatigue gotten worse? We've been very busy here lately," Havel said.

"I certainly have been busy, but I can't be this sleepy after noon. Am

I getting old already?" asked Professor, whose eyelids were getting so heavy that they were visibly drooping. "This is strange. Sorry, Vaclav, but will you get me a cup of water? Please, Your Holiness?"

Professor noticed that the Pope was lying across the table, sleeping with a contented face. "Your Holiness, why? Oh no, Vaclav . . . something's wrong. This sleepiness . . ." Professor's voice trailed off. He tried to stand up, but that was as far as he got before collapsing to the ground like a puppet with its strings cut.

"Sorry, William," said Havel—the only man left standing. He threw away the contents of his own cup, put a gag over the sleeping boy's mouth, and bound the boy's hands and feet. Havel whispered into the boy's sleeping face: "I'm very sorry, Your Holiness. Bear with it for a little while. It won't be very long, so..."

Suddenly, a shaky voice called from behind: "V-Vaclav? Wh-what are you doing?" The silver-haired priest hesitantly raised a gun as Havel turned around to face him.

V

"It's a 1-lie, isn't it, Vaclav?" asked Abel in a tone that suggested he believed Havel would answer in the affirmative. "Are you on some special assignment? D-damn. Did I interfere?"

"If you seriously think so, won't you quietly disappear, Abel?" Havel replied indignantly. He was smiling as he stood up, but his eyes were filled with murderous hostility. "Or else, will you come with me? Our Neue Vatican will welcome you gladly."

Abel shook his head as if he couldn't hear what Havel was saying. "A-aren't we comrades? Then why?"

Know Faith's eyes warmed at Abel's question. "You never change," he said as his eyes reverted to their usually calm state. He gazed at Abel as a loving father would, noticing that Abel was about to cry. "You really don't change and, therefore, absolutely don't understand our human feelings." Suddenly, darkness returned to Havel's eyes. "Please let me pass—or do you intend to hinder me? If so, I'll have to kill you."

"I-I can't do either one. I can't fight a friend," Abel replied.

"I can," Havel responded adamantly. With both hands hanging limp and launching his body using only his feet, Havel careened into Abel's chest as though he'd been teleported.

Abel's cassock ripped loudly, and as soon as a wave of severe pain washed over him, blood began to gush from the breast of his garment.

Havel's hand waved in the air before he forcefully thrust it down toward the crown of Abel's head. A few of the priest's silver hairs were cleanly cut off as he dodged to avoid impact.

"I missed? I wanted to send you to God painlessly. What a pity,"

Havel lamented.

"Vaclav, please stop," Abel cried as the hand on his chest turned red from the flowing blood. "You have no reason to kill a comrade, do you? Please, stop this madness!"

"No reason to kill a comrade?" asked Havel, contorting his neck. "I've already killed a comrade—and my oldest friend at that. Isn't killing two people the same thing as killing one?"

"Wh-what do you mean?" asked Abel. Behind his glasses, his eyes had grown large and round. "N-not Professor!" he cried as he crumpled to the floor.

"I used scopolamine—it's a muscle relaxant. First, you fall asleep, and then your heart slowly stops. He died painlessly," assured Havel.

As Abel screamed bloody murder, he raised his percussion revolver and released a line of fire that caused a frenzied roar—but the traitorous priest wasn't there. "Where . . . ?" asked Abel, confused.



As Abel searched for his enemy, he heard a voice behind him. "That was a lie. William is just sleeping. But..." said Havel, "your emotions are so easily manipulated that it's funny. That was cause for concern when you were my comrade, but as my enemy, it's a little unsatisfying."

"D-damn!" said Abel. As he listened to the faint noise of the wind splitting, he prepared to die. *At this position and angle, I can't avoid it!*

It actually was Havel who ended up having to preserve his safety. He pulled back his hand blade that was going to ensure Abel's death and jumped far back. A second later, the place on the stone floor where he'd been standing split open. "Ugh!" Havel exclaimed.

"That's far enough, Know Faith!" shouted Caterina, her slender shadow emerging from the door. The priest who stood by her side like a loyal watchdog fired a handgun that shot with the force of a cannon, leaving a trail of pure white gun smoke. "Vaclav, I don't think even you can make enemies of two agents," Caterina said to the traitor, checking with one hand that Gunslinger was still firing. "Return my brother and surrender. My power can save you, if you do what I say now."

"I'm sorry, Your Eminence, but my only salvation is in perfect faith — and that's the only thing Your Eminence doesn't have." Havel also had dared to bitterly tell the cardinal, who was God's representative and the most powerful person in the Vatican, "There is no faith in you." In an inquisition, that single line would assure death by fire.

Unlike Caterina, who'd gone pale, the criminal fingered the collar of his cassock coolly. "Besides, are you forgetting my power, Your Eminence?" asked Havel as his cassock loudly split open. "I am Know Faith — it wouldn't matter if the whole human race battled me!"

"Duchess of Milan, permission to fire?" Tres said as if scolding his master who stood frozen and silent.

At that point, a violent transformation already was taking place inside the heretic priest's body. Stripping off the remainder of his cassock, Havel revealed a bodysuit that gradually grew transparent.

"Invisible Field — invisibility camouflage!" Caterina cried. But by the time she realized what was happening, Havel's body had nearly disappeared before their eyes.

The Invisible Field was lost technology that used quantum mechanical overlap created by electromagnetic waves and the resulting interference to dramatically transform the optical characteristics of matter, such as light absorption and refraction, to give mechanical soldiers perfect "transparency." The Vatican had once fervently pursued the implementation of technology that made invisibility camouflage possible, but its application was extremely difficult, and because it had proved unprofitable cost-wise, the research was halted. Afterward, the prototyped systems had been officially disposed. Agent Father Vaclav Havel—Know Faith—possessed technology from that research.

"Father Tres, permission to fire! Drop him now!" ordered Caterina.

The M-13s Tres held in each of his hands shone dully. Gunslinger fixed his aim on his former comrade who was approaching complete transparency, pulling the trigger hesitantly.

"N-no, Tres!" yelled Abel. If Abel hadn't waved his hand to distract Tres, two bullets would have blown off Havel's head. But the bullets, which passed through empty space, only gouged the white wall.

"Out of the way, Father Nightroad! We have to defeat him now!" Tres shouted. Shaking off Abel, who was clinging to him, Tres again raised his guns. Setting all of his optical and non-optical system sensors to maximum sensitivity, he tried to secure his former comrade's location.

"It's already too late, Father Tres," echoed Havel's seemingly sad voice throughout the empty space. "I can't be detected by infrared or supersonic waves—because I was made that way."

The mechanical soldier's body turned around and was blown backward as if it had received a direct hit from a cannon. A human-shaped hole was gouged through the white wall he struck.

"Tres!" Abel exclaimed, dropping his jaw. The blow itself didn't have that great an impact, but the damage to Tres' brain was great after having been fiercely shaken by the lever principle. By the time he collapsed, his body was motionless.

"D-damn . . . Caterina!" cried Abel.

The beauty who had lost all of her battle strength in the blink of an eye stood with a stupefied expression, but upon hearing Abel's voice, she came to her senses. Her eyes widened as she ran over to her little brother, who was still collapsed in the center of the room. The instant she extended her fingers to try and touch the drugged boy, his body floated up into the air.

"Know Faith!" Caterina glared at the man she couldn't see, although she knew he certainly was there. "Return my brother Alec!"



"Are you speaking as the cardinal who controls the Vatican and speaking of him as a puppet — or as an older sister who offered her little brother as a sacrifice in order to gain power?" asked Havel sharply.

The spark in Caterina's eyes dulled for a moment. "Th-that's . . ."

"Caterina, a little while ago, you said, 'I can save you with my power,' but you can't save anybody," said Havel without a trace of boastfulness. He wasn't accusing, either, but merely pointing out the truth. "You don't understand the weakness of the human heart, because all you have is a vengeful heart. You can't understand people's weaknesses. Actually, you didn't bother to notice your brother's suffering at all."

Caterina stood still as if frozen.

All of a sudden, Know Faith turned around, carrying the Pope's body.

"Why . . . why you . . ." Caterina muttered. Her seemingly numb heart finally began to beat at the sight of her brother being abducted. Into the open space, the cardinal shouted, "Why are you doing a thing like this, Know Faith?"

Havel's faint but pronounced voice answered her shout: "I know faith. Therefore, I must embrace the crown of thorns."

"Somehow, this has gotten absurd," Antonio said. His declaration, delivered as he checked for split ends, sounded about as profound as saying, "Yesterday's lunch was nasty." He failed to notice that the expression on the face of the room's owner was growing vicious. "Actually, isn't the abduction of a Pope a rare event that happens only every two thousand years? At least Cardinal Sforza was

unhurt."

"I wish it had been the reverse. How dare she shamelessly return alive when His Holiness has been kidnapped by heretics!" said Minister of the Department of Doctrine Cardinal Francesco di Medici as he glared out the window at the neighboring Papal mansion. He couldn't stop himself from verbally abusing his half sister who'd just returned from Prague ten minutes ago. "This time, it's the end for that woman. On top of the traitor being one of her subordinates, she can't make any excuse for His Holiness being kidnapped. There's been some contact from Neue Vatican, hasn't there, Father Borgia?"

"No, nothing in particular," Father Antonio Borgia replied, reclining on the guest sofa. "The group at the Department of Foreign Affairs seems to be feverishly gathering intelligence, but they don't seem to be making much progress. It's a little strange that there hasn't been any movement. It's been three days since the incident—hasn't His Holiness already been killed?"

"That's impossible," said Francesco, stroking his pronounced chin.

Alfonso d'Este, who led Neue Vatican, had a pushy temperament, but he was never a fool. Francesco, who was his nephew, knew that best. Without fail, Alfonso would show some movement in the coming days—and it would be substantial.

"Maybe there's been some kind of trouble," Antonio suggested. .

Francesco glanced up to find Antonio, who'd been intently checking his hair, avert his eyes with a smile.

"To them, this incident is like an opening performance. The abduction of a Pope probably will cause an unprecedented disturbance," Antonio said.

"Hmm, is that how you see it?" asked Francesco, shrugging his shoulders in an attempt to pretend he was disinterested. However, his eyes grew increasingly sharp as he peered at Antonio. *I can't underestimate this guy*, he thought. At first, when the young man had approached him, Francesco had thought the man was no more than

a dandy of nobility. But, as he revealed unexpected sources of information from time to time and traveled in and out of Caterina's vicinity, the young man also seemed to be securing a place inside the Department of Foreign Affairs. He wasn't merely a buffoon. *Besides, if anything happened to Alessandro now ...* he thought as the visages of powerful, noble-born cardinals crossed his mind.

If his little brother were to die, the next Pope would be decided by the cardinals at a papal election meeting. As far as actual power and achievements were concerned, Francesco's superiority would not crumble. But because of his lowly birth—his only vulnerable point—it was certain that his political opponents would attack his status as the illegitimate child of the previous Pope Gregorio and a lower-class knight's wife. In order to avoid that, Francesco desperately needed the support of a high noble. The Borgia family possessed the most famous lineage in Hispania and had turned generations of prime ministers and cardinals into princes of Valencia.

"At times, Father Borgia," replied Francesco, resting his chin atop his intertwined fingers. "It's about your promotion to Bishop of Valencia, which your father asked about the other day."

"Excuse me, Your Eminence," interrupted a voice that seemed both restrained and assertive. After knocking, a woman wearing a special police officer's uniform entered the office. "I'm Sister Paula. You sent for me, and I've come."

"Ahh, thank you. Let me introduce you, Father Borgia," said Francesco. "She is Sister Paula, The Vice Bureau Chief of the Bureau of Inquisition."

"Sister Paula of the Bureau of Inquisition? So she's the so-called Lady of Death?" asked Antonio with a faint hint of surprise in his voice. *Isn't Sister Paula of the Bureau of Inquisition the second-highest-ranking official of the Bureau of Inquisition after its bureau chief Brother Petro and the go-getter who substantially altered the organization?* Compared to Petro, who was of Roman high noble birth and often was referred to as "the wild boar" behind his back, the woman nicknamed "Lady of Death" cast a dark shadow of fear over those who opposed the Vatican—or rather those who opposed Francesco.

The nun's expression was surprisingly tender, despite her reputation. With the calmness of a librarian, Paula whispered to her superior: "Your Eminence, an urgent message has arrived from the Duchy of Bohemia. Rebellion has broken out in the eastern city of Brno. The citizens revolted, executed the governor, and occupied the entire city."

Francesco's face clouded. "Rebellion in Bohemia again?"

The Duchy of Bohemia was located in the remote eastern region and was close to the Empire—a nation of vampires in which heresy and paganism had thrived for years. Only two years prior, a rebellion over heresy had occurred. The Vatican had intervened and finally subjugated what had become a profound civil war.

"Have there been any injuries to church workers? Has anybody been executed?" asked Francesco.

"There were no injuries. *They* led the uprising," Sister Paula replied.

"What?" asked Francesco, raising his eyebrows in surprise.

"The directors of the church in Brno led the rebellion. They're calling themselves Neue Vatican and are asking that the churches in the surrounding areas secede from the Vatican," explained Sister Paula. The next words of her report made the cardinal shudder. "Further, three hours ago, our local intelligence source confirmed Alfonso d'Este's presence in the city cathedral. Alfonso was said to be accompanied by a 'fifteen- to sixteen-year-old boy with pimples on his face.'"

Know Faith

...Blessed be ye poor: for yours is the kingdom of God.

— *Luke 6:20*

I

"No matter what you ask for, it's unlikely to be granted," said Minister of the Department of Doctrine Francesco di Medici, whose baritone was as hard and intimidating as a sturdy sword.

The setting autumn sun cast a soft red tint over the Pope's Palace Plaza adjoining the Department of Doctrine Palace, but there was no sign of warmth in Francesco's eyes as he gazed down from the window. "Cardinal Sforza has taken responsibility for her subordinate's misconduct and is under house arrest in Milan. As her subordinates, I can't let you take part in the formal operation. I thought you understood that much reason, Doctor Wordsworth?"

"I beg that you indulge me, Your Eminence Cardinal Medici," Doctor William Walter Wordsworth—AX agent "Professor"—replied, facing the cardinal's refined Albion profile. "The Department of Doctrine has the right to lead the operation to rescue the Pope, and the Department of Foreign Affairs has no objection to it doing so. We only want Your Eminence's permission to be allowed to participate as personnel in the operation."

"I'm entrusting the Pope's rescue to the Bureau of Inquisition," said Francesco. Considering the rare patience Francesco was showing Professor, it seemed as though he were treating the scholar, who also was his famous sister's subordinate, with extra care. "The operation plans already have been submitted, and the military institution has approved it. Immediately after the Pope's rescue, the entire army stationed around Brno will invade the city. There must be a way to annihilate the heretics. If these plans are changed now, it'll hinder the movements of the whole army. I need you to understand that it's impossible to add participants."

The cardinal's speech was especially cold, but it was true. The map of the Duchy of Bohemia displayed on the office monitor and the cluster of small lights that nearly obscured it were testament to

that. Each one of the pinhead-size lights indicated multiple units of the combined Vatican-Bohemian allied army that was mobilized to crush the heretics who had rebelled in the local municipality in eastern Bohemia. The allies numbered thirty thousand. They and the heretic army of more than five thousand continued to stand off.

If the Vatican Army charged into the city now, it probably could eradicate the heretics calling themselves Neue Vatican from the area. But if they lost any more time, people who were dissatisfied with the government in Rome and who sympathized with Neue Vatican might emerge from among the neighboring lords or church workers. There already had been reports that one of the units of the church's army had seceded from its home unit and switched to the side of Neue Vatican. With every passing moment, the huge, finely tuned war machine continued to ferociously revolve. There was no room to thrust the foreign body called "AX" into its gears.

"If you say it can't be helped . . ." said Professor, bowing his head, "Well, thank you for explaining, despite the fact that you were so busy. I'll take my leave now." Professor started to exit the office, but he stopped suddenly in front of the door. He turned around—appearing as though he longed to continue gossiping over tea—to find that the cardinal had come to the door to see him out. "Oh, that's right. There was one more thing I wanted to tell you. Is that all right?"

"What?" asked Francesco.



Professor'

Professor's eyes stared into Francesco's face as he whispered: "It's about that missile that was stolen from the Assisi air base. According to our investigation, the missile currently should be in the city of Brno. I suppose Your Eminence has formulated some plan for its disposal?"

Holding the door open for his visitor, the cardinal's usually stern face appeared bewildered. "Missile? What are you talking about? I haven't received any such report."

For a moment, one pair of quiet blue eyes and one pair of sabre-colored eyes glared at each other. A second later, they separated as though nothing had happened.

"Excuse me, I seem to have remembered wrong," Professor said, lightly lifting his cane. "Sorry for taking so long and for suggesting something stupid. I have no excuse to do so, seeing as you're so busy."

"Please, never mind. I was happy to meet the famous Doctor Wordsworth. Next time, by all means, come and visit when not on business. I'd welcome it," Francesco replied. He watched as the scholarly priest walked down the long corridor of the Department of Doctrine, his chiseled profile brimming with shadows, downcast.

"Your Eminence?" called a voice from behind him.

Francesco glanced up, and then he turned toward a monitor on the wall like a bird that had spotted its prey. "Paula? How are the preparations there?"

"They're complete," replied Sister Paula, the Vice Chief of the Bureau of Inquisition, whose face filled the screen where the map had been. "Brother Philippe and I already are in place, so as soon as you give us orders, we can carry out our holy duty at any time. There's just one thing I want to confirm." Her expression on the monitor was profoundly calm as always; however, the masterful way that she delivered information had the tendency to make onlookers uneasy. "Is it really okay to dispose of the other matter first, rather than rescue His Holiness? In the event that our

operation succeeds, I believe that there's an extremely high probability that the shaken Alfonso will murder His Holiness."

"I don't care. Your objectives at this time are to dispose of *that* and obliterate the false Pope. We're not rescuing the Pope," said Francesco without missing a beat. His countenance growing more dismal, he added: "If the worst happens and Alessandro is killed, it would have little effect on the Vatican itself. But if the world learns about that missile—its warhead, actually—that definitely would be a danger to Rome. We have to avoid that one by all means."

As Francesco bluffed, he felt a letter in his pocket that the heretics had sent to the cardinals' conference eight hours earlier. It was a top-secret document that he'd crushed in his hand right before it had reached its destination. In addition to the contents written in the letter, he had to obliterate the false Pope Alfonso and *that* which he'd seized from the world. If not, it might become a big scandal that would rattle the Vatican. If that could quietly be achieved, not even the Pope's life could be called a high price. The Vatican had to be put ahead of everything, because it was a superior government that had supported human society for a thousand years.

"I will repeat to the bitter end, Sister Paula, that you must dispose of *that* first. I don't care if you completely ignore the Pope's safety," insisted Francesco.

"Very well," Sister Paula replied as she reverently made the sign of the cross. "Bureau of Inquisition Sister Paula and Brother Philippe will now embark on our holy task. Please wait for news."

II

"What a cruel thing to do," said Abel. The plaza was full of a crowd gaping at the exposed burnt corpses. As soon as the silver-haired priest standing behind them pushed up his round glasses, which were thick as the bottom of a milk bottle, he made the sign of the cross. His eyes, the color of a winter lake, were brimming with sorrow.

They were in Brno city, standing in the plaza in front of the castle gate. The huge building that carved a demonic shadow across the evening sky was Spielberg Citadel, which had been the governor's palace until a few days ago. After the rebels had killed the governor, the biggest citadel in Bohemia was offered as the temporary shrine of Neue Vatican Pope Alfonso d'Este. Three days ago, Neue Vatican had burned to death dozens of church workers in the plaza in front of the main gate, having judged them as blasphemers. All those sentenced to death had been labeled apostates. It had been reported that, during communion, the Bishop of Brno and others who'd been turned to charcoal had scattered the host on the tips of the believers' noses and demanded money, and if the believers hadn't paid, the bishop and the others threw the hosts back onto the altar.

"It seems understandable that they should have been disqualified as church workers, but not burnt to death," Abel said.

"This public burning was the first act that Neue Vatican embarked on after the uprising," Tres said, rejecting the silver-haired priest's objection. Tres also was dressed like a typical traveling priest in a cassock and cloak, but in contrast to his companion, he regarded the people gathered in the plaza coldly. "I conjecture that the public burnings are propaganda to make Neue Vatican's legitimacy appeal to the citizens of Brno."

"I wonder if His Holiness is okay?" Abel asked. Keeping a cautious

eye on their surroundings, he lowered the pitch of his voice, which had gotten high.

A few soldiers who were chatting gaily passed right by Abel and Tres. The symbol adorning their collars was that of the infantry regiment that had seceded from the Vatican's Eastern Army and had announced their participation in Neue Vatican. Since Neue Vatican's uprising, neighboring Vatican army units (and church workers like them who'd revolted against Rome) had entered Brno, along with common lords, one after the other in a triumphant procession. Because the city was filled with unfamiliar people, Abel and Tres had been able to infiltrate inconspicuously, but that didn't change the fact that they were in the middle of enemy territory.

The tall agent sank his voice an octave lower. "Today, it will be one full week that Brno has been besieged by the church army—the Neue Vatican contingent should be getting suitably nervous. Say, Tres, you don't think they've already killed His Holiness?" Abel asked.

"Negative—that's impossible," Agent Father Tres Iqus replied. "If the plan were to kill His Holiness, they should have done it in Prague. As long as he has value as a hostage, the possibility of His Holiness being killed is extremely low. At least, I believe that he'll remain unharmed until Alfonso d'Este's coronation scheduled for tomorrow evening."

"I hope so," Abel said, but his expression reflected his feelings of dejection.

Tres' presumption was correct: Neue Vatican likely would be taking very good care of Alessandro. But according to Professor in Rome, Cardinal Medici and the Bureau of Inquisition had been exhibiting signs of turbulence. Francesco wouldn't stand for his younger brother being taken hostage and a false Pope being crowned. If not by force, he would try to prevent the coronation in some way—and when he did, there was no guarantee that it wouldn't endanger Alessandro.

"Let's find a way to rescue His Holiness tonight!" Abel exclaimed. As he observed the group of soldiers guarding the sturdy castle gate, he

began to feel tense. *If the intelligence we've been gathering here for a week is correct, the boy who was abducted in Prague last month should be imprisoned beyond this gate!* They also had one more ace up their sleeve—the missile stolen from Assisi. "By the way, it would be best if we could deactivate that missile. If they lose their ace in the hole, the Neue Vatican people might surrender quietly."

All of a sudden, a fake jovial voice called out to the two priests. "Hey, been waiting long, Bungler—Pistolero?" asked Leon.

When Abel and Tres turned around, they saw a giant who looked like a construction worker standing behind them, dressed in a gray work suit and grinning.

"Well, today was a mess. Those shitty priests kept pushing the construction deadline, so the scene is utter turmoil everywhere you go. Moreover, there aren't enough artisans, so I'm very busy," said Leon wearing a smile on his swarthy face that was somewhat reminiscent of the expression on a satisfied female carnivorous beast's face.

Agent Father Leon Garcia de Asturias boisterously sat down beside the priests. He winked at the street girls who'd been watching them, but they went pale and walked off as if they were frightened—perhaps thinking that they were about to be eaten. "Hey, I guess country girls are shy. I can't stand such naiveté. Maybe it's because of my charm? Am I a sinful man?"

"Affirmative. You still have seven-hundred-thirty-one years left on your sentence," said Tres.

"That's not what I meant!" Leon exclaimed.

"Now, now—calm down," urged Abel as he held back the giant who tried to attack Tres. Abel shot the giant a placating smile. "So, how are the preparations going, Leon?"

"Oh, they're perfect. Yeah, in two more hours, the big commotion will start, because I threw one the same as this into the water intake pipe," Leon replied. Having bluffed with sufficient confidence, he held out his thick hand to his comrades. On it rested a flat disk

resembling a woman's compact. "I took advantage of the hustle and bustle of construction so the soldiers wouldn't notice. But it was an emergency job, so I don't know how much rime it'll buy us."

"There probably won't be much time to spare. We have to find His Holiness' location and rescue him while the castle is in a state of confusion. And we must deactivate that missile, too," Abel said, wearily gazing at the castle towering overhead in the dusk.

The Spielberg Castle and the Saint Peter and Paul Cathedral where the coronation would be held the following day were said to be the two most important bases of the Neue Vatican faction. If that were true, *he* must be in one of them. *I hope it's the cathedral*, thought Abel.

"You two take care of His Holiness, and I'll do something about the missile. Although, there's an issue more troublesome than time: I'm worried that Know Faith—Havel—is in there," muttered Leon, as if he'd read Abel's thoughts. Leon studied his companions as they turned around startled. "What'll we do if we cross his path? Despite the fact that he's corrupt, he's still a former agent. Will he be tough, or can we convince him to come back with us?"

"Urn, that's . . ." muttered Abel.

Abel's faltering answer was interrupted by a more straightforward reply: "Delete him," instructed Tres with a coldness that could have sent the world into a deep freeze. "I'll deal with Havel—you two concentrate on the mission objectives."

"Can you defeat him, Gunslinger? Aren't you the least bit worried about his invisible field?" asked Leon.

"No problem. I've prepared a strategy to deal with it," Tres replied straight-faced as he pointed to cylindrical objects barely peeking out from each of his sleeves. "They're Doppler radars that Professor developed. Because of the frequency variation of double-sided electromagnetic waves, I can sense particle motion and can capture movements, regardless of whether the target is invisible."

Abel sheepishly spoke to Gunslinger after the latter offered an

explanation with such mechanical self-confidence. "Ah ... um ... Tres? About that—if possible . . . before we fight, um, peaceful persuasion—"

"I warn you, Father Nightroad. Do not get in my way this time," Tres insisted mercilessly. The mechanical soldier's unemotional, non-blinking eyes caught the silver-haired priest's distressed expression. "You obstructed my attack on Havel the other day in Prague. This time, if there is a similar violation of duty regulations, I'll delete you immediately."

Abel fell speechless despite wanting to argue for their former comrade.

Suddenly, a heavy hand squeezed his shoulder. "Cut it out, Abel. Don't think about Havel anymore," Leon said. "It's like Gunslinger says: He's already our enemy. You understand that, right?"

"B-but, there's still room to persuade him," Abel replied weakly.

"No, there isn't," Leon said warmly, as if he were trying to soothe a spoiled child. However, he didn't forfeit telling Abel the harsh truth. "Think about it—a person's life is a series of choices, starting from what to eat and where to sleep—about work, about women, how to use money and time . . . We go through every day being forced to choose and choosing all kinds of things." As his optimism faded and his black eyes sunk behind his eyelids, Leon fingered his necklace and continued muttering to nobody in particular. "We've been given countless choices in this world, and until we die, we have to keep winnowing down the absurd number, second by second. Its like that this time, right?"

The guard soldiers busily shifted to and fro among the bonfires that were being lit in the castle windows. Observing their actions, there wasn't an ounce of hesitation in Leon's voice as he said: "He chose Neue Vatican, but we chose AX. All we can do is prepare ourselves."

Abel was painfully aware of what that preparation entailed. There simply were too many things in the world that he couldn't accept, even though he understood them. "Leon, aren't you in doubt?" he asked, pacing. Considering that his world already had lost so much

brightness, one only could only imagine what kinds of thoughts were being generated beneath his silver hair. "How can you not hesitate to point a gun at a person who was a comrade—a person who was by our side until yesterday?"

"Because he has no more choices. When Fana—that girl— ended up in such bad shape two years ago, I consumed a life's worth of choices. My choice will allow that person to live one second longer—that's all," said Leon. The expression faded from Dandelion's face, but perhaps because he was thinking of the girl who lived in the special hospital ward in Milan, a dark light shone in his black eyes. "I won't hesitate. Even if our opponent is Havel, I'll kill him before I hesitate."

III

"Are you comfortable, nephew?" asked Alfonso. By some chance, Alfonso d'Este himself entered the isolation cell, accompanied by nuns bringing in dinner. Cognizant of his malice-filled expression, the skinny boy who occupied the cell shrank back, frightened.

Alfonso scornfully clicked his tongue in response to his nephew's cowardice. "Untidy . . . but you are the son of my great brother Gregorio, although you were on the throne temporarily. Can't you be a little stronger?"

Alessandro remained silent while he was being teased and looked as though he wanted to cry. His teeth were visibly chattering behind his half-parted lips.

Shaking his head bitterly, Alfonso said, "Really, for a weakling like you, sitting on the holy throne is like the end of the world. I could cry to think that the last precious five years were wasted on the likes of you."

The isolation cell was on the highest floor in Spielberg Castle's north tower, and if one stood by the window, he could see the streets of Brno below. Gazing down at the streets that had been illuminated by the sunset, Alfonso blamed the nephew who'd stolen his throne. "Understand, Alessandro? When I say that five years have been wasted, it means that the Vatican and faith were lost for five years. Do you know how much of a loss to the world that is?"

Alessandro's lips quivered as he stammered: "A-a-am I going to be killed?"

"I grieve for the future of the world, and His Holiness the Pope is worried about *himself*? Can't you at least show enough strength and spirit to call me a traitor?" chided Alfonso. He wholeheartedly lamented his nephew's frailty, but he didn't hate the stupid boy. The ones he knew he really should hate were Francesco and Caterina—

they were the fiends who'd betrayed their uncle Alfonso and who had driven him away. But Alfonso was a very fair man when he was calm. "Don't worry, Alessandro. I won't kill you," he said, trying his best to soothe his nephew, "because no matter what you say, you're a hostage. Hostages have no value if they're killed."

"H-hostage? Th-then, my brother Francesco—

"Oh, he doesn't care about your life," Alfonso replied plainly. It was irritating to him to have to explain obvious things. Alfonso narrowed his eyes as though the nephew he despised were there. "Don't worry, because I've prepared a different trump card for that damned Francesco. This time, he can't put a hand on us, and as long as he can't put a hand on us, you're safe, too."

Rather than feel a sense of relief after being told he wouldn't be killed, Alessandro began to show signs of suspicion. "D-different trump card?"

"One more trump card—the missile," Alfonso declared. II Ruinante's lips turned up slightly as he peered into his nephew's face. "If Francesco tries to move the siege army, I'll use it at once."

"M-missile? You'll drop a b-bomb on R-Rome?" Alessandro exclaimed.

Alfonso shook his head as if he regretted his nephew's ignorance from the bottom of his heart. "Who said I'd shoot it at Rome?" His saggy jaw didn't jut toward the south, where the holy capital was, but in the opposite direction—toward the east, where dark Carpathia lay. "If I fired the missile at Rome, it certainly would be shot down en route. I'll shoot it at the Empire—into that nest of monsters."

"A-at the Empire?" said Alessandro as his face rapidly blanched.

The New Human Empire, founded by Methuselahs, was the largest nation on Earth. It possessed numerous lost technologies that contributed to an overall strength said to exceed that of the Vatican. Was Alessandro's uncle saying that he'd shoot a missile at the Empire? Even a baby knew that the vampires wouldn't take a

unilateral attack from human society quietly.

"I-i-if you do that ... w-war ..." stammered Alessandro.

Although at times Alfonso came off as a virtuous person, that guise quickly diminished. "Yes, there will be a war. Moreover, that bomb's warhead was exhumed and restored in absolute secrecy— it's very special. The vampires absolutely won't take it quietly. Heh heh. I can imagine Francesco's confusion."

Alfonso's thirst for vengeance was highly apparent, and Alessandro gradually began to experience a glimmer of understanding as what he'd been told began to resonate. His brother's and sister's schemes hadn't been the reason that his uncle had been defeated at the papal election council five years ago—it had been the weakness of his virtue that was the cause.

"Uncle, I can't believe you're going that far. Do you want to be Pope that badly?" shouted Alessandro in one breath, without stuttering for a change. "Do you really want to get your hands on the Vatican that badly?"

"Get my hands on the Vatican? Stupid—that was mine to begin with. Wasn't that stolen from me underhandedly by you and your siblings?" asked Alfonso. His nephew's censure didn't impact his deep-seated delusion one bit. As he ground his teeth, Alfonso's fingers crooked fiercely as if trying to grasp something he'd lost. "Yes, that's mine! After my great brother's death, it should have been me who led the church and people, but you and your siblings stole that from me!" He didn't notice that the nuns behind him flinched as if threatened. Glaring directly at the powerless boy, Il Ruinante bellowed, "Watch, Alessandro! I'll take back my glory. The papal throne is mine. I was unjustly robbed of my throne, even though I had the talent, the achievements, and all the necessary qualities. I'll make you and your siblings repay this debt without question! Yes, I absolutely—"

Suddenly, a low voice echoed: "Your Holiness ... Excuse me bothering you amid this confusion. There's something I urgently need to speak with you about."

Acting as though he'd been doused in cold water, Alfonso turned around. "Havel?"

The tall priest stood in the isolation cell's doorway. His face was covered by carefully clipped whiskers and was terribly thin, and his green, calm eyes were somehow reminiscent of an ancient martyr. Vaclav Havel—former Agent Know Faith—bowed deeply to the Pope. "Sorry for interrupting your chat. There's something I want to tell you about the castle's defenses." "What is it?" asked Alfonso.

Whether he didn't notice the displeasure in his master's voice or did notice but ignored it, Havel's voice was very businesslike. "You should've entrusted me with this castle's defenses. When I confirmed a little while ago, a considerable number of guards had been placed in the cathedral that I didn't know about. When I asked about it, they said it was by your direct order. Is that true?" "Oh, that matter?" asked Alfonso. Having his thoughts, which had been lofted toward the glory of heaven, abruptly brought back to trifles probably made him feel as though he'd been insulted. Alfonso nodded, annoyed. "Yes, the defense of the cathedral was too thin for tomorrow's coronation. I diverted about four hundred people. What about it?"

"You can't," Havel said in a tone that was too blunt to have used with his master.

The priest somberly shook his head. "I carefully calculated the location of the defense units. Withdrawing two companies' worth of personnel from there will cause holes in the castle's internal defense system. I'd like you to recall them at once," said Havel.

"It's no use. The units already have entered the cathedral. It's beneath me to recall them," Alfonso declared. Unable to hide his disgusted expression, Alfonso studied his subordinate's thin face. "Besides, you saw the knights who hastened to join us, didn't you? They're all strong, matchless people who've gathered for the sake of true faith. As per your advice, this castle's defense equipment has been perfectly set up. Who could possibly wriggle through this defense net? It's fine to be cautious, but I can't condone you overdoing it."

With his arms folded, Havel spoke plainly: "Agents ...With their abilities, they easily could break through this much of a defense line. Underestimating them is unconscionable."

"Agents?" asked Alfonso as spontaneous laughter broke through from his lips. "Havel, I understand your feelings and that you don't want to underestimate your former comrades, but after all, aren't these the people who couldn't protect Alessandro? They're insignificant. Isn't it more important to prepare for the coronation?"

If one could remain impartial, it was clear that what Alfonso had said was reasonable. The following day's coronation wasn't merely a reception—it was a strategic event that would shake the Vatican and widely challenge the existence of Neue Vatican. Naturally, hindrances would arise, and there wouldn't be enough guards no matter how many there were.

The stubborn priest was about to further argue his case when a new person entered the isolation cell. An aging soldier—his military shoes clanking—saluted and said, "Excuse me, is His Holiness here? Sorry for interrupting your conversation. I'm Captain Barbarigo of the Eastern Army Twenty-Seventh Infantry Regiment. There's something I urgently must inform His Holiness the Pope about."

"Oh, it's you, Umberto?" asked Alfonso, turning to face the aging captain who'd slipped out of the Vatican's Eastern Army the other day and joined Neue Vatican.

Umberto Barbarigo was a soldier whom Alfonso had been friendly with when Alfonso was a cardinal. Attached to the Eastern Army's Sixth Brigade—the "Justinians"—Umberto had frequently engaged in distinguished services in battle, but he'd also been prosecuted on suspicion of massacring POWs and civilians. It had been Alfonso, then Minister of the Department of Doctrine, who had saved Umberto when he was put on trial. Because of that, Umberto had come running up at the very front in this uprising, leading his subordinates.

"What's wrong? Some business?" asked Alfonso. "Yes, please look at this. My subordinate on patrol found it sinking in the water intake pipe in front of the castle wall," Umberto said, showing him a fist-

sized plastic disc.

Spielberg Castle took in water from outside the castle through underground aqueducts. Having probably submerged to the bottom of the water, the disc had wet mud clinging to it. "Well, what is this?" asked Alfonso. "A bomb—with a timer," alerted Umberto. "A bomb?" Although Alfonso unconsciously threw his head back, he didn't try to run away. He glared at the disc on the old captain's palm with a suspicious face. "Who did this? And what kind of strength does it have?"

"When I showed it to an engineer, he said its contents were an extremely low-power fire bomb. At most, it could burn down one house," Umberto explained.

"That much?" said Alfonso, the tension leaving his face. He glanced over at Havel and then at Barbarigo. "Thank you, captain. For the sake of caution, make sure that there aren't any more set. Did you hear that, Havel? I don't know whose doing it is, but it seems our enemy can only set fire as a nuisance." Without acknowledging Barbarigo, who'd saluted, Alfonso continued to sarcastically address the silent former agent. "Half the defensive troops will turn to guard the cathedral as scheduled. We don't have time to split off hundreds of people to deal with a spiteful opponent. Havel, I'll leave the castle's defenses to you. Take good care of them."

Havel took Alfonso's comment with a grain of salt, and with his typical melancholy expression, he asked, "Where are you going, Your Holiness?"

"To the cathedral. I have to make all kinds of preparations for tomorrow's coronation. Oh, that's right—why don't I go look at my missile before that? Because, no matter what you say, our faith depends on that," Alfonso replied, laughing good-humoredly as he left the isolation cell with the attending nuns hurriedly following him.

The priest remained in the isolation cell, watching Alfonso go, looking deeply depressed.

"U-um, Vaclav?" asked Alessandro.

Havel's eyes turned toward the timid voice. Seeing the pimple-faced boy gazing up at him worriedly, Havel broke into a sad smile. "Do you despise me, Your Holiness?" The former agent twisted his mouth as if he were mocking himself. "I swore to protect you, and I betrayed you. I suppose you're rather angry?"

Alessandro stammered as always, but not so much that he was hard to understand. "Wh-when I was brought here, I-I c-certainly was a little afraid of you, but . . ." he said, slumping his shoulders and scratching his head, "b-but you d-didn't make fun of me. E-even now, you p-protected me from my uncle. I a-absolutely d-don't think y-you're a bad person. I j-just don't understand wh-why a person like y-you betrayed the Vatican. F-for money? Not that, right? Why did you do it?"

Havel was silent, looking down at the street from the window. The expression on his thin face was calm and didn't show any sign of displeasure. It was difficult to ascertain his state of mind as his response had nothing to do with the Pope's question. "I love this place, you see. Brno is at its most beautiful when viewed from here."

The isolation cell was the highest point from where one could view the streets below. Bonfires kindled around the streets, lighting up the city as if it were high noon. Gas lamps lit the lanes, which stretched like blood vessels, and tenderly warmed the soldiers and citizens mingling among them. Outside the city's castle wall, beyond the darkness of the valley, countless lights could be seen twinkling brightly to one side. They were the searchlights of the Vatican-Duchy of Bohemia combined army, who were wary of a surprise attack.

"Brno is an old city. For ages, the people who came to spend their lives here have marked the city here and there. Of course, Brno isn't equal to Rome or Prague, but I still love the place I was born," Havel said.

Standing beside the priest as the two gazed down at the fantastic night scenery, Alessandro asked, "Vaclav, you're a n-native of this city?"

"Yes. My father was a carpenter here," Havel replied. The north wind blowing down from the mountain brought with it a piercing chill. Autumn tended to be short in Brno, but this year, it was especially so. There was a chance for snow the following day.

While draping his own cape over Alessandro's shoulders, Havel answered precisely: "I moved frequently after my father had died—to Prague, Firenze, Rome—but my home forever will be this city."

"Hmm. Wh-what's th-that?" Alessandro shouted, leaning out over the window handrail. He saw shabbily dressed men and women applauding around a small group of men who were skillfully operating a strange instrument that looked like a big cello with a lever stuck onto it.

"That's called a hurdy-gurdy. It's a musical instrument that's been used in the farming villages around this area since long ago. They play it and dance to polka during festivals and whatnot," Havel explained.

"F-farmers? So, th-those people are p-peasants?" asked Alessandro. Suddenly, his eyes lit up with curiosity. "Wh-why are p-peasants in the c-city? D-don't p-peasants 1-live in v-villages?"

"The Vatican army is outside the castle, so they've evacuated to the inner city," Havel answered.

Havel's response was clear, but it didn't seem to satisfy the boy. Tightening his spotty face, Alessandro asked again: "Wh-what do you mean, evacuated to the i-inner c-city? Th-this place might become a battlefield, right? They should flee to a d-different place."

"Flee—and then what?" asked Havel kindly, although an extremely sensitive person might have sensed underlying hints of anger in his voice. "They're poor and have no savings. By changing addresses, all they can do is die by starvation or freezing. Your Holiness, do you know why they're taking part in Neue Vatican, which is at an overwhelming disadvantage?" The priest extended his arm and pointed at the valley. "Abnormal weather has been prevalent in this area for a few years. For the past several years, there has been terrible damage from cold weather, and this already is an

agricultural area without enough industry. In order to avoid starving, the farmers had to dispose of the assets they had on hand—first their land, and finally, their children."

"Ch-children?" asked Alessandro. At first, the Pope blinked as if he didn't understand what the priest was saying, but he finally seemed to grasp his point. A rare flush colored his pure white face. "They sold th-th-th-their own children? Wh-what a thing to do! What did the church in th-this area do? If th-things like that were happening, seeking aid from Rome . . ."

"The church couldn't do anything. No, it's more appropriate to say that they *didn't* do anything," Havel replied.

It was true that the church in this area had overlooked their business dealings. It chiefly had been rich people and nobles from Prague who'd bought the fields from the farmers on the cheap and resold their daughters and children. Nearly all the high-ranking church workers in this area were young people who were purchased with church allowance money. It wasn't at all to their disadvantage.

"Until the Neue Vatican uprising, the farmers in this area nearly all spent their lives not unlike livestock. During the uprising, Archbishop d'Este promised a three-year tax exemption for Brno and its surrounding farmers. I don't have to explain the rest, do I?" asked Havel.

The farmers' laughter was louder than a while ago. How could they be this optimistic tonight when they might die tomorrow?

Observing the farmers' merriment with a grim expression, Havel muttered, "This is the reason I betrayed you, to answer Your Holiness' question from a little while ago. I couldn't forgive them for using faith to make money, or for turning weak people into food, or the system that allowed that." Before he knew it, the priest's fingers had dug deeply into the handrail, warping it like putty, but Havel kept looking at the farmers as though he hadn't noticed. With more sadness than anger in his voice, he continued: "Maybe survival of the fittest is the way of the world. Maybe it's wrong to blame the strong for eating the weak. Maybe justice and strength are irreconcilable. However ..." said Havel as the handrail tore off with

a strange sound, "because those are absolute realities, shouldn't only faith and God be the ultimate allies of the weak? Wasn't that what the system was for?"

The man who'd fought for God and church as an agent and as the former Chief of the Bureau of Inquisition had mechanized the majority of his body at the end of a series of battles. As if trying to wring out his strength, Havel blamed himself for wasting half his life. "'Blessed are the poor' — I couldn't forgive that God ignored the weak!"



Still motionless and silent, Alessandro listened to the traitor's words. Because of his mental illness, Alessandro had been made fun of in the Vatican, but his intelligence never was low, nor was his sensitivity dull. He could fully understand what Havel was saying, and he also was aware of what it meant that the priest was speaking in the past tense. *But . . . what can I do?* he thought. He'd become Pope solely because of his bloodline and rarely was able to look people in the eye or speak to them — and he hid behind his sister when anything dangerous happened. What in the world could such a pitiful boy do? What could he do about heretics? *There's nothing I can do.*

A gentle voice fell upon the ears of the boy who was standing there helpless. "It's fine, Your Holiness," said Havel, smiling as though he were embarrassed by the torn-off handrail he held in his hand. "You shouldn't blame yourself like that. You didn't cause today's situation."

"B-but, I'm the Pope. I-if I were stronger, th-this kind of—"

"Maybe so, but you didn't have that strength," Havel replied in a tone somewhere in between sadness and scorn. "It isn't weakness or evil. At least, it isn't something for which you should be blamed — especially when said person is ashamed of that weakness." Offering the powerless boy encouragement by hugging him, the priest peered into his face. "Your Holiness, right now, you can't help me or the people gathering here. But in the future, you —"

"Fire!" An unexpected scream interrupted Havel's sentence.

Lights switched on around the castle, which had gotten somewhat noisy, and the sound of military shoes shuffling resounded down the corridors.

"F-f-fire?" asked Alessandro.

"It seems that way; however, there's no need to worry. Your Holiness, please stay here," instructed Havel. As he cautioned the boy looking down anxiously not to slip, the priest muttered quietly: "AX have come at last."

IV

"**H**urry, hurry! Extinguish the fire!" Alfonso shouted, inhaling smoke and coughing violently into his handkerchief. Flames were flaring up in various spots around the underground hall like mischievous imps. "You damned Vatican!" Alfonso moaned, kicking the palm-sized disc rolling at his feet.

These tiny plastic discs were the source of the flames that were spreading throughout the underground hall, and they numbered more than one hundred. They had flowed in from the underground aqueduct, and when they'd simultaneously exploded on the water's surface, they'd scattered burning oil all around their surroundings.

Undoubtedly, a person as crafty as the devil had used these. There was thin copper plating on the inside of the plastic container with special acid applied to the top of the plating. The bombs thrown in the water immediately sank to the bottom, but as time passed, the acid reacted with the plating and produced a large amount of hydrogen. The bombs floated up using the hydrogen produced as flotation, flowed into the castle along the stream, exploded, and went up in flames. The disc Barbarigo had possessed earlier had been a failure, because for whatever reason, it hadn't floated up.

"Your Holiness!" Barbarigo called, raising his voice at the raging Pope. Barbarigo had been up front, leading the soldiers as they tried to put out the fire. One eyebrow was completely singed off his blackened, sooty face. "It's impossible to put out the fire using human strength alone! All we can do for now is block the underground and wait for it to burn itself out from lack of oxygen!"

Alfonso ground his teeth at his subordinate's advice. He couldn't fathom that the Pope was allowing himself to be bothered by this kind of trick on the important eve of his coronation. "But the castle won't be harmed by this degree of fire," Alfonso said. Remembering something crucial, he suddenly clapped his hands and ordered the

priests next to him. "Oh yes! *That* is stashed in the block ahead of here, right? Move it at once to a safe place just in case. It would be terrible if it happened to catch fire."

"Very good, sir!" the priests and monks replied, bowing reverently and scattering to carry out the Pope's orders.

One of the last two monks remaining timidly opened his mouth from beneath his drooping hood: "Most humbly, I must speak," said a monk. "If you move the missile, hadn't you better move the hostage, as well? There is a danger that the enemy will take advantage of the confusion and infiltrate."

"Hmm? Yes, that's true," said Alfonso. The fire continued to rage, and no one knew when it would stop. While fretfully keeping an eye on it, Alfonso nodded absentmindedly. "Move him someplace suitable, but keep guarding him carefully."

"Yes, at once!" the monk replied. Understanding the Pope's direct orders, the monks bowed and turned on their heels. They started to briskly exit the hall, but a thin shadow wavered before their eyes, blocking their way.

"Agents often use the tactic of avoiding direct confrontation. That's because their duty is illegal, and there are many situations in which they can't expect support," echoed Havel's voice, ringed with inviolability. Bright green eyes stared directly at the two monks from his thin face, which was reminiscent of a martyred saint. Father Vaclav Havel slowly shook his head at the two monks. "His Holiness Alessandro is unharmed and will stay that way—as long as you two don't go near him. Abel—Tres?" "Ugh!" exclaimed Abel, the taller monk. Meanwhile, Tres—the short monk—shed his brown robe, revealing two large handguns he'd been gripping. "Change in plans: Father Nightroad, you take Alfonso d'Este hostage." Catching his former comrade in the red light of his laser sights, Gunslinger shouted, "I'll deal with Know Faith!"

"Th-these are Caterina's underlings?" Alfonso shouted, darting through the mass of soldiers, who still didn't have a handle on the situation and were noisy with consternation. As he flinched back, his jaw trembled in shock.

"Please come quietly, Archbishop d'Este!" Abel said. Because his cover was blown, all he could do was take Alfonso hostage and free Alessandro. Abel fiercely closed in on the former archbishop, who used a nearby nun for a shield.

"You're the one who's going to be quiet, Abel," Havel said sharply to the silver-haired priest. Havel's tall body kicked the floor with inhuman strength, and after he somersaulted into the air, he landed like a cat in front of Abel.

"Please step aside, Vaclav!" Abel demanded. "Out of the way, Father Nightroad!" shouted Tres. As Abel's and Tres' voices overlapped, Havel stripped off his cassock and was turning invisible.

"Please wait, Tres! Vaclav, I'm begging you!" pleaded Abel. "I'm telling you to move, Nightroad!" shouted Tres. By the time Tres had pushed Abel away and raised his gun, Havel already had disappeared, but Gunslinger proceeded to mercilessly squeeze the trigger.

Mixed with the sound of flames popping and soldiers shouting, a calm, deep voice echoed: "It's no use, Tres. You can't see me—but I can see you," said Havel.

Tres suddenly kicked the floor hard, launching into a diagonal jump. The next instant, the stone floor he'd jumped from the second before exploded as if it had been shelled.

There was a sound of surprise in the echo that resounded through the air. "Dodged?" said Havel.

As Havel's question still lingered on the breeze, Tres landed, and his gun muzzle was turning, drawing a complex track. "Point twenty-two seconds late," Tres declared.

The thunderous roar of both battle handguns rattled the area, but there also was a faint indication that something was ricocheting in space that shouldn't be.

"What's this? I'm visible?" asked Havel with a slight hint of struggle in his voice. It wasn't a direct hit, but the bullets had caught Know

Faith somewhere. "It's Doppler radar? The work of William . . ."

"Point thirty-five seconds late," Tres announced against the sound of explosions coming from his firearms. He accurately fired at his invisible foe without a shred of mercy, causing huge bullet holes to gouge the stone wall Abel and Alfonso were focused on as they watched the strange battle. After firing several shots that he was certain would take out Havel, the expression that washed over the mechanical soldier's face began to reflect his anxiety. "Both bullets missed—target lost."

Know Faith's movements had registered on the Doppler radar until Tres started firing, but they had suddenly disappeared. "The Doppler radar is operating normally. Unable to conjecture. Why can't it grasp Know Faith?" asked Tres.

"I'm due God's blessings. If God leads me, nobody can harm me," said Havel in a low voice that could be heard from inside the flames burning on the ground beside Tres. "It's very difficult to find something that has integrated with its environment. Doppler radar senses the motion of objects, so if I enter the flames and align with their faint wavering, you can't catch me."

"Tres, on your right!" shouted Abel. All of a sudden, an arm wrapped in flames appeared in the air like the hand of God written about in the Bible. It grabbed Tres' arm as he struggled to raise his gun muzzle, hurling the short priest's body into the wall. "Damn, Tres!" Abel cried.

Perhaps because his balance had been damaged, the mechanical soldier remained down facing upward, showing no signs that he was going to get up. Abel instinctively tried to run over to him, but human-shaped flames blocked his path.

"Be quiet, if possible, Abel. I don't want to hurt you," said Havel.

"Vaclav... Why?" Abel groaned at the sight of Havel's pitiful body wrapped in flames. "Why are you going this far?"

An exultant voice interrupted their conversation. "Well done, Havel!" said Alfonso, pushing the nun he'd been using as a shield to

the side and peering into Abel's eyes. "Isn't this the insolent individual who turned a gun on me in Rome? Perfect. I'll send you to hell right here and now!" An evil gleam radiated from the small gun the former archbishop snagged from one of the soldiers standing beside him. Pointing it at Abel's face, Alfonso yelled, "Come on, you damned dog of Caterina's! You can be cleansed by my—the Pope's—hand. You should be grateful!"

Gunfire shook the underground hall, but it wasn't Abel who was in agony the next moment.

"Havel . . ." Alfonso groaned, still leaning backward after having been shoved a second before the gunfire began. As he opened his eyes, he saw that smoke was still trailing from the thin priest's hand. "No, it's impossible. Havel, you've . . . betrayed me?" The priest didn't respond to his master's accusatory cry. Maintaining his silence, Havel thrust out a sharp dagger.

"Eek!" shrieked Alfonso, swiftly ducking his head away from the thrusting hand, saving his own life within centimeters. The sharp flash that plunged behind him passed through the space where his head had been a second prior, cutting off some white hairs. Havel's dagger proceeded to attack the face of the nun behind Alfonso, who was trying to ram the tip of a pointed metal pole.

A clear metallic ring reverberated, and the nun's body fell backward as though she were weightless. The pole, which should've been driven through Alfonso's head, instead stuck into Havel's shoulder.

"I'd heard there was a genius assassin in the Bureau of Inquisition," said Havel, pulling a ring needle—a metal pole with holes in it so fingers could pass through the center, which was used as an assassin's weapon in the ancient Far East—from his shoulder. "You're the Lady of Death who's used all kinds of dark weapons to kill hundreds of people, aren't you?"

"I'm Sister Paula, Assistant Chief of the Bureau of Inquisition. Today, I've come to deliver the judgment concerning charges of heresy against former Archbishop Alfonso d'Este and to enforce the sentence," the woman replied in a calm voice.

There was a solemn expression on Sister Paula's meek-looking face. Her voluptuous body, which was sheathed in a dull silver bodysuit worn under the nun's habit she'd cast aside, was quite out of balance with her plain exterior. The bodysuit wasn't her underwear; however, nor was it merely an armored battle suit—it was a fortified soldier's battle assistance system.

"Judgment," The Lady of Death announced to the group who, with the exception of Havel, remained silent in astonishment, "Former Archbishop of Cologne Alfonso d'Este is a heretic and cannot be converted. Accordingly, we will deal with this by immediate death sentence. That's all. Now, I will carry out the sentence."

V

Ultimately, only the young novice who'd come to deliver lunch was left alive out of the adherents who'd occupied the workshop. Everybody except for her had died instantly—their hearts gouged by a wire pick—or rather, a small edged weapon fastened to the end of a wire that flew at them.

"Bwah hah hah! Hello, miss!" said a man. Peering down at the apprentice sister who'd fallen on her butt and was smeared with about twenty people's blood, he twitched his lips vulgarly. His appearance was inhuman: He was unusually short, his build was roly-poly-like, and the body peeking out from beneath his cassock had a dark sheen. There also was too much space between the eyes on his misshapen face, which made him look like some kind of fish.

"Can I ask you something?" proposed the man. "You see, I'm looking for the missile you people stole." He pointed to the center of the workroom with his slick, blood-soaked pick, where a pool of dark water containing a leak of hazardous liquid fuel was spreading outward. On the worktable set up in the center, a pencil-shaped object about sixteen-and-a-half feet in total length lay on its side. "Is that it?"

"Y-y-yes," the young novice replied, nodding her head vigorously.

Suddenly, the monster's thick lips arced into a smile. "BINGO! Yeah! After all, God is the ally of the righteous! Whoo!" He emitted a laugh as grating as newspaper crumpling together and clapped both hands. Silently bathing the girl in his lingering gaze for a few moments, he said, "Thank you, miss. To return the favor, I'll kill you painlessly."

"Eek!" the nun screeched.

As he watched the girl's face contort in fear, the man licked his lips and slowly raised his arm. Using both hands, he forcefully thrust

down the pick toward the novice, but the result was a high-pitched, earsplitting metallic noise. "What are you?" he asked.

The novice fainted and her eyeballs turned back in her head. The vicious weapon that had swung down had grazed her blue hood and dug into the floor.

The small man began to feel increasingly suspicious as he pulled out the weapon by its wire and asked, "Are you an ally of these heretics?"

"I'm AX Agent Leon Garcia," responded the figure. As he twirled the chakram on his fingertip, the giant shrugged his broad shoulders. "I came to disarm that missile. Did you interfere, brother?"

"What, you're an ally?" asked the man. After ascertaining Leon's identity, he felt relieved and offered his hand to the agent who entered the room gracefully. "I'm Brother Philipppo from the Bureau of Inquisition. Nice to meet you. Well, no need to say that, is there?"

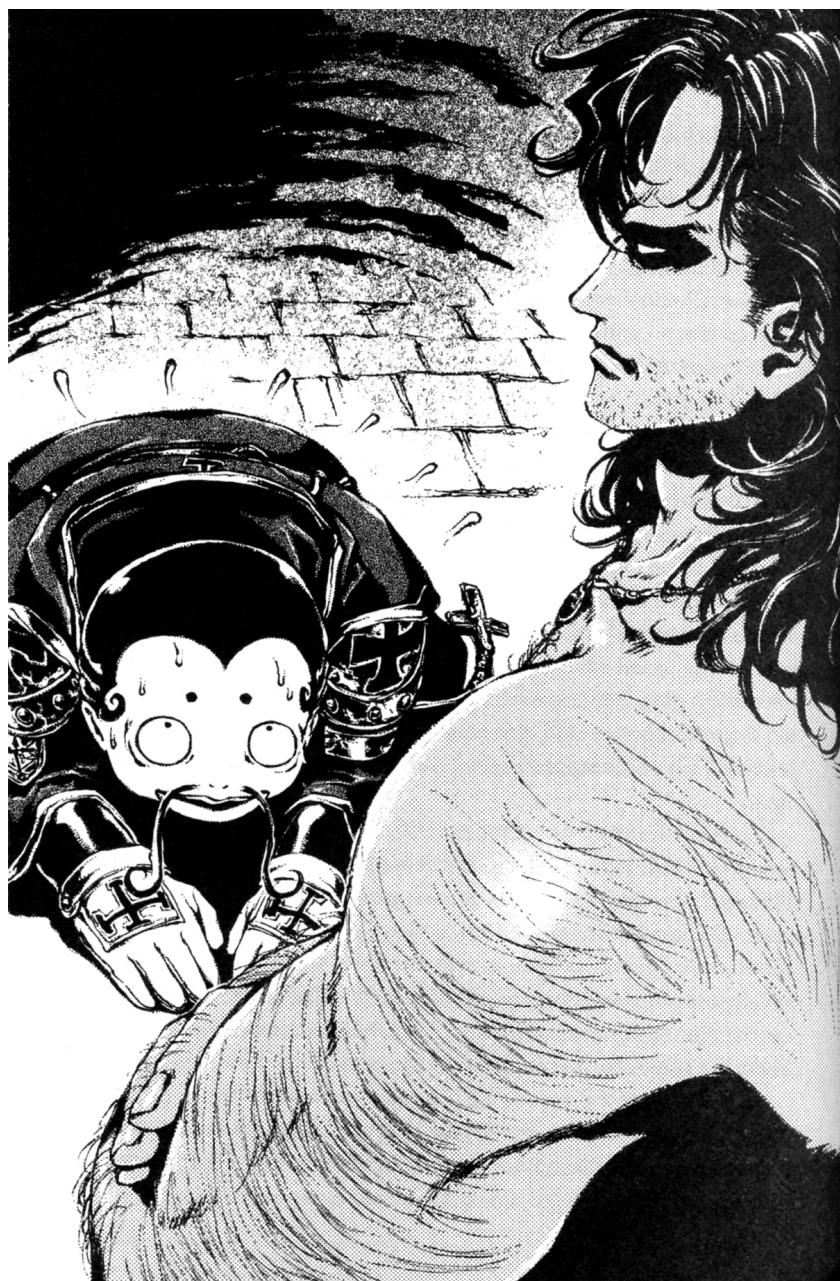
Suddenly, Philippe's demeanor changed dramatically, and like magic, his hand pitched forth the pick with the energy of lightning. Hit directly in his windpipe, Leon's huge body fell head over heels into the pool.

"Bwah hah hah! Critical hit!" Philipppo gave a high-pitched laugh as he watched a tall geyser of blood gush from Leon's neck. Performing an impromptu backflip, he clapped both hands as if he couldn't have been more pleased. "Serves you right, hairball! Interfering with a person's enjoyment—you should writhe around in macho hell forever!"

All of a sudden, an unexpected guttural voice echoed from behind Philipppo, putting a damper on his victory dance. "Hey, round eel," said Leon. "What do you mean by all this? You'll die in accordance with your answer." The half-naked giant, whose cassock floated atop the pool's surface, stood threateningly right behind Philipppo.

The next instant, Philipppo spun with a swiftness that was out of character for his fat body. "Sorry! Please forgive me! I was super

carried away!" He groveled with so much energy that he made a noise when he threw himself on the ground, and then he put his forehead to the floor. "It's a joke—a joke. It's only a joke, heh heh. I'm such a prankster."



Leon peered at the back of Philippe's head with bloodthirsty eyes as the small man squirmed on the floor like an annoying pest. However, Leon seemed to have reasoned that it wouldn't be a good idea to kill the inquisitor. Jutting out his jaw, he said sullenly: "Disappear—and don't show me your ugly face again."

"Yes! Thank you very much!" Philipppo replied. With a dexterity that seemed as though it were enabled by witchcraft, Philipppo retreated to the floor, still groveling. He was about to leave the workroom when he noticed something. "There!" he shouted. As Leon's attention refocused on the missile, Philipppo sprang onto the unconscious novice on the floor. After he picked up the girl with superhuman strength inconceivable for his small body, the inquisitor threw her into the pool.

"Wh-what are you doing?" Leon roared angrily.

The unconscious girl's body caused a huge splash and sank to the bottom of the water. Without hesitation, the giant jumped into the pool.

"Now's your chance!" Philippe said, and with a flutter of his hand, he sent the wire pick in a straight line toward the giant holding the girl's body in the water.

"Knock it off!" shouted Leon.

Without looking, Leon ricocheted the wire pick off the back of his hand. He pulled the girl out of the pool and placed her on the floor, and then got out himself, extending his hand to the edge of the pool. "Getting carried away, you fat eel? I'll kill you after all!" said Leon.

"Kill me?" asked Philipppo. His triumphant expression hadn't changed even though his weapon had dropped into the water. Still holding onto the wire from the pick, his lips fluttered. "Do you think you can kill someone as beautiful and strong as I am, hairball? You're the one who'll die!"

Leon's hair literally stood on end. The wire pick had fallen into the

water, and as it still was attached to the inquisitor through the wire, a dreadful electric current had attacked Leon's body. The giant's heart jumped and the muscles in his body twitched spasmodically as they received irregular signals.

"Bwah hah hah hah! Yahoo! Critical hit! You shouldn't underestimate me, agent. Whoo!" shouted Philipppo. From the tens of thousands of electric generation cells grown throughout his body, this fortified human could perform high-voltage electrical discharge to a maximum of three hundred thousand volts. Brother Philipppo laughed, holding his stomach as Leon barely opened and closed his mouth, gasping as he received an electrical attack strong enough to instantly kill a horse.

"Ohh, you're still alive. You have more life force than a cockroach! Amazing!" Philipppo quipped. After doing a backflip, Philipppo laughed and clapped his hands. "It's time to say goodbye now! Please die quietly!" The boisterous inquisitor fingered a console next to him. As soon as his round ringer pushed a button among the experiment tools, a dark rectangle opened in the pool of water, and the sound of a chain ringing echoed. The emergency water evacuation port began to drain out the water with a roar.

"Oh ... doh ..." Leon muttered as a huge whirlpool began to swirl around him. His body paralyzed, and his four limbs trembling in the current, Dandelion was swept toward the water evacuation port.

"H-huh?" gasped Philipppo from near the console. Suddenly, a tremendous force began to drag his short body toward the pool. "Wh-what is this?"

Club. "You're . . . com ... ing with ... me, you round . . . eel," said Leon, still submerged in water and struggling to speak. The giant's hand grasped the wire pick Philipppo who hurled in earlier. Seeing that the wire was firmly wrapped around his wrist, the inquisitor's eyes bugged out.

"Y-you poor loser . . . Eeeeeek!" shrieked Philipppo. His legs slipping and pulled by the weight of Leon's body, Philippe's body rolled into the water.

As soon as the water in the reverse-spinning whirlpool covered Philippe's body, the conduit of the water evacuation port sucked in the men with a rumble. They continued to call each other names through the entire process.

VI

"Fast!" urged Havel. No sooner did he speak than Paula's body disappeared, leaving only a trace. Although he thought she was completely gone, Paula's distressing shadow appeared next to Alfonso like a daydream.

"Y-your Holiness, look out — "The voice of the large official blocking the inquisitor was cut off unnaturally.

The Lady of Death, who had pulled the ring needle out from the back of his head, stood there coldly. With her steps and her breathing unhurried, she moved in before Alfonso's eyes. He thought her white hand had turned when the tip of a dark weapon extended between her target's eyebrows.

"Eek!" Alfonso's face tensed until he saw the ring needle break with a high-pitched shriek.

"Your Holiness, withdraw — I'll deal with this," Havel said. Raising the palm that had shattered the evil weapon, Havel pushed his master behind him, catching a glimpse of the woman drawing a new item from her back. It was a moon blade — a dark weapon used in close hand-to-hand fighting that combined crescent-moon-shaped blades crosswise. She held one of the two blades, each about the length of a long sword, in both hands.

Havel challenged first. He walked forward as if sliding, by moving only the lower half of his body and thrusting out his arms at the same time. As he thrust them, he twisted his wrists, transforming his palms into hand blades, and then aimed a deathblow capable of piercing an iron plate toward the pit of his opponent's stomach.

Before Know Faith had advanced, the Lady of Death arrived. By the time her voluptuous body had coquettishly begun moving toward him, Havel's blade had sliced through the air, missing her by a few microns. Paula's moon blade caught the crook of Havel's fully

extended right arm, shattering it in one blow.

"Ugh!" moaned Havel. It was the first scream that had slipped from the priest's lips all day. As if some kind of power had been applied to it, his right arm rotated in an unnatural direction.

"Divine punishment," said Paula with no emotion whatsoever. She jumped back, and as soon as her slender arms flexed, the moon blades gave one ill-omened flash toward Havel's neck. The Lady of Death moved only her long, slitted eyes. At the end of her intense gaze, a ribbon of white extended from the gun the silver-haired priest was holding.

"Will you hinder the inquisition, agent?" asked Paula without a hint of anger in her voice. She almost sounded as if she were pleased to have found some new work. "If so, I'll have to remove you, too."

"Run, Abel!" Havel shouted, still cradling his right arm. "You can't kill people, but if we don't kill her, she's unstoppable!"

"Ugh," groaned Abel.

The warning was too late. The inquisitor's shadow was already closing in before Abel's eyes. The instant the gun reflected its owner's hesitation, the moon blades in her slender hands aimed for the priest's neck.

"Point eight seconds late," Tres said.

Had the bullet released from the side and not bounced off the glistening sword, Abel's neck would have been battered. Tres stood up and continued firing toward the nun who'd lost her weapon.

"Are you all right, Your Holiness?" asked a voice.

All of a sudden, the roar of multiple shouting voices could be heard alongside the echo of countless pairs of military shoes stamping. When they turned around, they saw a group wearing military uniforms charging from the hall entrance. It was soldiers who finally had noticed something wrong and came to handle the situation. The soldiers pointed their guns at the men and the woman armed with weapons next to the Pope who'd collapsed on

the floor.

"A-arrest these people!" Alfonso ordered, still sitting on the floor. "They're Vatican assassins!"

Paula glanced at the group of guns and softly clicked her tongue, realizing along with the two agents that it would be hard work to dispose of this quantity. Pretending to gracefully wave her slender arm, she threw a small disc on the floor.

Screams arose among the oncoming soldiers as the disc rolled on the floor and exploded with a loud boom. Once the smoke laden with tear gas permeated the crowd, the soldiers began coughing furiously.

"Father Nighthroad, I suggest you take this opportunity to escape," said Tres, who'd noticed that the shadow of the Lady of Death had already disappeared into the smoke. "The operation has failed. We'll retreat, too."

The smoke was thinning rapidly, but if they were able to make their way to the underground aqueducts during the confusion, they'd be able to escape to the castle's exterior. However, the silver-haired priest's actions exceeded Tres' expectations.

Still speechless, Abel placed his gun on the floor and raised both hands in the universal symbol of surrender as Havel, the other wounded priest, stood before him. "Please go, Father Tres," Abel said, staring at Know Faith's thin face. "I'll surrender—but you—please escape."

For an instant, a faint trace of emotion crossed the mechanical soldier's face, one that could be read as both irritation and approval. But a moment later, Gunslinger assumed his usual masklike expression and turned on his heel. "Operation failure. One person lost — withdrawing."

VII

The early evening meal included fragments of black bread and a gruel of minor grains that had begun to rot a bit.

"This looks good," Abel said. He was the only prisoner in the jail and was trying to smile, but he couldn't crack the hard expressions of the boys who'd brought his meal.

The boy who carried a machine gun and appeared to be the leader nodded curtly. "Eat it quickly without saying anything uncalled for," said the boy, "because we'll be watching you from here while you eat."

"Yes, yes. I don't mind. Let's see . . . our Father who art in heaven, thanks for your blessings," Abel recited hurriedly before starting his only meal of the day. As soon as he'd downed the gruel in one gulp, he began munching on the bread faster than he could swallow it. As he opened his mouth wide, he turned around and said, "Let's see . . ." Coughing once, the priest scratched his head, noticing that the boys were staring at his food and drooling. With an embarrassed smile, he proffered the still-untouched bread. "You may eat some if you'd like."

"Taking food from a prisoner of all things!" a boy exclaimed in a high-pitched voice that hadn't yet been affected by puberty. The boy turned away his face in disgust, but his eyes betrayed him by stealing a peek at the bread.

Abel observed that the boys' hands were terribly thin and that their cheekbones were very prominent. "Please wait a moment," Abel said.

Their weapons raised, the boys suspiciously watched as the priest searched through his pockets with manacled hands. They couldn't figure out what Abel intended to do.

"Let's see, I'm certain it was . . . Here, found it!" Abel proclaimed.

The boys' eyes widened as Abel pulled out the small box with a rustling noise.

Holding up the caramels for the boys to see, Abel said, "I have chocolate, too. It's partially eaten, but have some if you'd like."

The boys stood in silence, wondering if the priest were planning something. They stealthily peered into the priest's smiling face—but unable to withstand the groans of their empty stomachs, all the boys except for the leader reached toward the small box, stuffing their cheeks with the sweet squares.

"Hey, you're not going to eat it?" Abel asked the boy with the machine gun who'd put the untouched candy into his pocket as his comrades shouted for joy. "It's not poisoned. Please don't worry."

"I'll take it back to my little sister," the boy answered, twisting his mouth. "She's never eaten anything like this."

"Really?" asked Abel. This time, it was Abel's turn to be silent. Judging from the boys' appearance, they didn't seem to be citizens of Brno originally. They probably were the sons of farmers who'd migrated from nearby villages. *Is Neue Vatican so hard pressed that they had to make these young boys carry weapons? When the church army's attack begins, these children will be the first to die*, he thought. "It's terrible! What is Vaclav doing?" Abel spat out. "Making children carry weapons... Isn't it going too far?"

"Yes. I think so, too," replied Havel from behind the indignant priest. His thin face covered with short whiskers, Havel broke into a sad smile.

"F-father Havel!" cried the boys.

"Ahh, you shouldn't be upset," the one-armed priest kindly told the boys who'd covered their mouths in surprise. "It's a precious present that you received from Father Abel. Eat and enjoy it. Would you leave me alone with him while he eats? I need to speak to him."

"B-but? Father, isn't being alone with this spy dangerous?" the boy

with the machine gun asked, gazing up at Havel with pleading eyes. After the affectionate priest smiled and nodded, the boy gave up on giving advice. "Okay, let's go, everybody. Father, please be very careful."

The boys nodded obediently and streamed out of the room.

Checking to see that their backs had disappeared beyond the door, Havel stood next to Abel, peering into his eyes, and asked, "How are you, Abel? I'm very sorry. I told them not to be rough, but . . ."

"Besides that — who are those children, Vaclav?" asked Abel. Displaying a rare hint of rebuke on his face, Abel glared at his former comrade. "It's not like you to make children carry weapons like that!"

"It was His Holiness Alfonso's idea to use boy soldiers," Havel replied, grimly shaking his head as he removed Abel's handcuffs with his left hand. Havel's right arm didn't extend past his shoulder because he'd taken it off after his artificial arm had been irreparably broken in the previous night's battle. He would've had a spare were he in Rome, but this country couldn't repair his limb, let alone provide him with a spare. "We're severely short-handed. Between guarding the city and constructing the defense facilities, we don't have enough working hands, and therefore, don't have any regular troops to spare to facilitate this kind of rear defense."

Sighing faintly, Havel gazed through the open window in the wall with a gloomy expression. The tall mountain range that surrounded Brno beyond the city walls was visible from the tower. The mountains' surface should've been red with autumn leaves, appearing as if it were burning this time of season—but instead, it was covered with colors of iron and ash. Fluttering between countless tents and groups of military vehicles were military flags, each with a red cross painted onto a white background—the Roman cruciform flag of the church army.

"When the siege army's offensive begins, there won't be any resistance," Havel said.

"Knowing that, why don't you surrender?" asked Abel plainly. (To

say "casually" would've suggested too much emotion.) As he followed his former comrade's gaze and faced the window, Abel sighed. "With this difference in troop strength and without God's assistance, you have no chance of winning. Shouldn't you surrender at once to ensure the safety of the citizens?"

"Abel, do you believe in God?" asked Havel.

"Huh?" Abel replied. Abel's eyes narrowed in response to the straightforward question. "Well, because I'm a priest . . . although everybody calls me 'Father Useless'... In general, as far as God ... Yes, somehow I do believe."

"I don't believe in God," Havel declared.

"Huh?" Abel narrowed his eyes again at the AX's most faithful man's admission.

I don't believe in God, Havel thought to himself. If God really existed, would he favor power over justice and strength more than what is right? Why do poor people who live righteously and who are pushed to the brink of death have to pick up swords and fight?

The sound of a bell from the Saint Peter and Paul Cathedral where the coronation ceremony was being held echoed in the distance as fireworks ignited sporadically. There were no people in the streets, because all the general citizens were afraid of the church army's attack and had shut themselves in their homes.

Havel quietly spoke to the city that seemed to have died. "'Blessed are the poor', 'Believe or you won't be saved'—they're all lies. God doesn't exist."

"Vaclav, if you don't believe in God, you should surrender now," Abel said without a trace of blame directed toward the apostate. With eyes like those of a child lost on a journey, he continued, "Last night, Cardinal Medici tried to kill Alfonso, completely ignoring His Holiness' safety. He wouldn't allow the enforcement of the coronation and will try to stop it regardless of whether it destroys this city."

"Rome can't lay a hand on us," Havel said, still gazing down at the quiet streets. "As long as we have our last trump card—the missile underground—the church army can't invade this city. For some reason, the existence of that bomb means death to all of them."

"What does that mean?" asked Abel.

"It means death to all of them," Havel replied firmly. Would they blow themselves up, taking the enemy army with them? No matter how large a missile it was, the most it could do would be to blow up the castle. Did a bomb exist that could annihilate three sides of a large army? Such questions didn't cause the confidence in Havel's voice to waver. "Seventeen-and-a-half pounds of calcium cyanide and its vaporizer have been loaded onto that warhead. By simple calculation, that's the right amount to instantly kill half a million people. It's more than enough to annihilate the soldiers who've invaded."

"Calcium cyan ... what?" Abel exclaimed as he attempted to mention the fearful death god.

Calcium cyanide was a poisonous crystal commonly called potassium cyanide. It was plenty dangerous on its own, but when mixed with the acid that filled the warhead, it chemically changed into volatile hydrogen cyanide and became a toxic gas that could kill anyone in the vicinity. If it were dispersed using a vaporizer, it would be possible to cover the entire city with a cloud of death within a few minutes.

"Th-that kind of poisonous gas was loaded into the missiles warhead? What on Earth...?" said Abel.

"Of course. It was installed for battle with the Empire," Havel replied. There wasn't any anger in Havel's voice, but his fingers trembled as they touched his rosary. "Did you know hydrogen cyanide gas is effective against vampires? Cardinal Medici intends to fire it into the Empire during the next crusade."

"P-poison gas ... into the Empire?" Abel asked, astonished.

The Vatican had tried the exhumation and restoration of ancient

poisonous gas and biological weapons many times, but it hadn't achieved any results. On top of the gas and weapons being too difficult to handle, they hardly had any effect on vampires, whose bodies neutralized nerve agent gases like sarin and tabun. Hydrogen cyanide was a rare exception, however. The reason remained unexplained, but it seemed to be connected to what vampires called "bacillus," which makes the blood-borne symbiotic germ consume too much oxygen. Because cyanide compounds essentially were poisons, they damaged the oxygen supply to the bacillus. It had been confirmed that vampires who inhaled cyanide gas could be killed as easily as humans. Although, unlike silver or sunlight, cyanide gas was fatal to humans, as well as to vampires.

Abel couldn't fathom what would result if that missile were shot into the city. "It's not just Methuselahs—there are large numbers of Terrans living in the Empire, too! Besides, considering the wind's direction, it'd endanger this area, too!"

"If the intent is to kill a large bug, the life or death of a small bug makes no difference," said Havel, smiling icily. Looking away from Abel, the thin priest spat out at the floor. "That's how it is, Abel. If the order is to topple the vampires, it's unlikely that the Vatican cares about comrades in the border regions or the Empire."

"That's the reason you turned traitor, isn't it, Vaclav?" asked Abel in a scratchy drawl. His face grew dark as he glared at his former comrade. "Because you knew about this, you—"

"Abel, I have one favor to ask of you," Havel said, correcting his posture and erasing his gloomy smile. "It's about His Holiness Alessandro. Please, take him with you and leave this city right away."

"What?" Abel asked as if he couldn't follow his companion's words. *Leave the city with Alessandro? Isn't he an important hostage for Havel and the others?*

"The Bureau of Inquisition ignored him and attacked. Anyway, Cardinal Medici probably has no intention of rescuing his little brother, which means His Holiness has no value as a hostage," Havel replied. The look in his eyes was the same as when he'd

spoken with the boy the previous night in the isolation cell. They were the eyes of a teacher discussing a poor but beloved pupil. "He's being taken to the cathedral. His Eminence Alfonso intends to declare his own ascendancy by exposing his nephew at the coronation ceremony. If you're going to save His Holiness, now is the best chance."

Abel peered into the eyes of his former comrade, who was leaning slightly to the left. "Vaclav, there's still time," Abel argued with an awkward sincerity. "Won't you come back? I'll beg Caterina with all my heart. So —

"Thank you, Abel," Havel said with a smile that Abel wouldn't forget. "Did you deliberately stay behind last night in order to tell me that? Unfortunately, I can't go back. Going back now would mean abandoning the people who came here and believed in me. I intend to protect that disgusting weapon as long as I can."

"Can you protect it in that shape?" asked Abel, glancing at the space where Havel's right arm should've been. "As long as you have the missile, the church army can't invade the city. But that means the Bureau of Inquisition absolutely will attack the castle in order to deactivate it. Can you ward them off?"

"I won't repeat the same mistake I made yesterday. There are still more than four hundred soldiers posted in this castle. We'll be able to protect it for sure," Havel said. Did he actually believe what he was saying, or had he already resigned himself to an undesirable fate? He turned around, leaving the cell with his right sleeve swinging limply, and he didn't look back. "Therefore, Abel . . . please take the very best care of His Holiness."

VIII

"It's been a long, steep road," said Alfonso. Surveying the cheering people from the unvarnished Pope's bier beside the altar, the former Archbishop Alfonso d'Este—actually, the first Pope of Neue Vatican, Alfonso I—nodded in satisfaction. Packed into the cramped hall were the common lords, church workers, and soldiers who'd rebelled against Rome's tyranny.

The long road to the Pope's throne had been a succession of difficulties, beginning with the previous Pope's death and Alfonso's failure at the conclave, after which he'd remained in obscurity in Cologne for five years. Then, there was the failure of the Silent Noise operation in Rome, and now this uprising. It was time he was compensated for the tribulations he'd endured, but because he knew he couldn't yet relax, Alfonso stifled his smile.

Alfonso had been a little irritated the previous night because he'd never imagined that a Vatican agent would infiltrate that far. If they would've made trying to assassinate Alfonso or steal back Alessandro second priority to focus their strength on disposing of the missile, Neue Vatican's strategy would've failed by now. Without their trump card for negotiation, the invading church army would've reduced the city of Brno to ashes. Actually, it had been a close call.

It was all because of Havel's ineptitude when he took charge of the defenses within the castle. Although he was a former agent, at the end of the day, he really was a priest. It had been a mistake to entrust the duty of defense to him in the first place, when he was no more than an amateur. Today, Alfonso had left the defenses of Saint Peter and Paul Cathedral entirely to Captain Barbarigo in order to avoid repeating that failure. Barbarigo and his subordinates, who were professional soldiers, had checked nearly the entire expanse of the city last night and were still on guard inside the cathedral. Perhaps because of their heroism, they hadn't yet found any

indication of an attack by the Bureau of Inquisition or agents hiding within the city.

"When this ceremony ends without incident, the lords who continue to see which way the wind blows also will make their intentions clear," Alfonso muttered quietly as he bestowed a benevolent smile upon the hundreds of cheering lords and church workers, and the guards under Barbarigo's command who stood around them with their weapons raised attentively. "When that happens, even damned Francesco will have to make his army retreat. You see, Alessandro — in the end, it was meaningless to bring you to this city."

The boy standing behind Alfonso and barricaded by soldiers didn't reply. The white robe he wore closely resembled the one Alfonso was wearing, but Alessandro had chains bound over the top of his.

Seeing that his nephew's face was as pale as if the boy were being taken to the gallows, Alfonso nodded in satisfaction. His nephew certainly meant little as a hostage, but he was plenty useful as an ornament added to the coronation ceremony. The plan, called "the real Pope has captured the false Pope," would prove to be an ideal stage effect when Alfonso announced his own victory to Rome.

"Papum habemus!" a voice cried out to declare the advent of a pope.

Startled by the shrill cry, Alfonso returned his attention to the ceremony, which already was underway. Bishop Dopchek, who served as Chief of the Cardinals of Neue Vatican, reverently walked toward Alfonso, holding the white crown. The triple tiara, which sparkled with hundreds of gems and gold and silver threads, was the crown that Alfonso had believed was intended for his own head for the five years since his brother's death—even long before that. Havel had tried to complain about the huge expense required to create the crown, but Alfonso didn't care. It cost money in order to visually assert the Pope's authority and make the lords prostrate themselves. Havel, a man of lower-class birth, didn't seem to understand that.

Crown in hand, the bishop said, "Your Holiness, please accept this crown upon your head as evidence of your authority. When you do —"

"You are God's representative on Earth—one who fishes for people—as God's foremost servant and the person who leads us," chanted the crowd.

Alfonso slowly stood up amid the attendants chanting in chorus over Dopchek's voice. As he curved his shaking fingers into hooked talons, he seized the crown the old bishop offered him. "Ahh!" A hoarse scream slipped from the new Pope's lips, which were dried from stress, and the triple tiara fell to the podium with a light sound. Excessive excitement seemed to cause the strength to leave his fingers. A second later, the cone-shaped gem-work rolled around on the dais, falling between the attendants, before the disconcerted new Pope's eyes.

All of a sudden, a pure white flash virtually scorched the retinas of everybody within the hall. It was hard to discern whether the unfortunate onlookers had realized that the crown had exploded following the ferocious wind and roar that accompanied the flash.

"What? An explosion! What happened?" Alfonso howled amid the hard-to-endure ringing in his ears.

The inside of the hall, where the solemn ceremony had proceeded until this point, now was taken over by the stench of gunpowder and blood, screams of agony, and angry, confused bellows. However, it wasn't the voices of his retainers asking about his safety that reached the confused new Pope's ears.

"Mwah-hah-hah! Yes, yes—unlucky!" Philipppo jeered. Amid the rising smoke, a round object falling from the ceiling and trailing laughter landed boisterously before Alfonso's eyes; it peered at the astonished new Pope with an extremely vulgar smile. "Or is it lucky? Whichever it is, you'll die by my lovely hand, won't you?" Alfonso's eyes bugged out. "Inquisitor?" The short monk thrust out his beer-belly-like stomach and warped his face into a broad grin that resembled a catfish. The *Vineam Domini*—the symbol of the Bureau of Inquisition—was embroidered onto the sleeve of the monk's robe. But how in the world he had snuck past the guards? "K-kill him!" Alfonso ordered in a shrill voice. "C-captain Barbarigo, shoot this man! He's an inquisitor—an enemy of God!"

"Prepare to fire!" Barbarigo yelled. The old captain's reaction was swift. At their commander's order, the guards stationed by the walls simultaneously raised their guns as the commander lifted his. "Fire!"

Multiple gunshots overlapped, as did multiple screams a beat later—but they weren't the screams Alfonso wanted to hear.

"Wh-what?" Alfonso exclaimed, contorting his face.

The instant the gunfire began, the church workers, nobles, and important retainers who supported Neue Vatican fell as they tried to rush the exits, resulting in blood-curdling screams and a shower of blood.

"Wh-where are you aiming?" Alfonso roared at the guards, who were aiming at the surviving attendants as if they were hunting animals. "B-Barbarigo, what are your subordinates doing? Stop firing at once! You should kill the enemy of God over here!"

"We *are* killing the enemies of God," the middle-aged captain said, drawing the handgun at this hip.

Seeing the handgun's barrel pointed at his own forehead, Alfonso's eyes revealed that he finally had started to comprehend what was going on. "I-impossible, Barbarigo. You've betrayed me?" "Isn't it you who turned traitor, *Your Holiness*?" asked Barbarigo snidely. "I'm still a loyal soldier of the Vatican. It's unthinkable that I would be convinced to side with these country nobles who stink of horse shit. Of course, there also is the fact that Cardinal Medici promised to promote me to Major General."

"Y-you're forgetting your old debt!" Putting the gun that was aimed at him out of his mind, Alfonso allowed venom to spew from his mouth. "You murderer! Who do you think saved you from being tried?"

"You're the same kind of murderer, Your Holiness. So, what shall we do with this person, Philippo?" asked Barbarigo.

"Hmm?" the inquisitor asked, screwing up his face. "Kill him, because he's tiresome. I don't have time to bother with this old

man!"

"Very good, sir," Barbarigo replied. After he skillfully put on his beret with one hand, he twisted his lips into a grin. "This is goodbye, Your Holiness. It was a short acquaintance, wasn't it?" "Sh-shit!" Alfonso exclaimed.

Since ancient times, a hero was considered an individual who remained staunch when confronting adversity. If the definition were limited to that point, Alfonso d'Este was worthy of the being called a hero—but immediately before the trigger was pulled, Alfonso jumped sideways and clung to the body of his nephew, who had fainted. With a swiftness that belied his age, he set up Alessandro as a shield, thrust his handgun at the boy's temple, and growled, "D-don't move—any of you!" Hiding in the shadow of the boy Pope's limp body, the former archbishop angrily raised his voice. "If you move, I'll shoot Alessandro!"

Hardly startled by Alfonso's desperate threat, Barbarigo gazed back rather gloomily at the inquisitor. "What should I do, Philippe?"

"It's simple," Philippo replied, moving his thick, slimy lips smarmily. "Finish them both. All the people in this town are going to die, anyway."

"True." Barbarigo extended his arm toward Alfonso, whose eyes widened enough to fall out. Barbarigo carefully fixed the aim of his large-caliber military handgun on Alfonso's heart. It would be simple for the gun to pierce Alfonso's "shield" and instantly kill him. "Uncle and nephew, let's make you good friends at last as you die!"

The sound of the trigger and the roar of gunfire overlapped — but it was Barbarigo who bent backward, screaming in pain. A bright red stream of blood flowed from his hand, and the gun he'd dropped immediately after firing sat smoking on the floor.

"Ha ha! They came after all?" Philippo asked, although he didn't appear to be that surprised. He crooked his short neck toward the stained glass window, where there was a tall shadow hefting a percussion revolver still trailing smoke. Gazing at the silver hair glistening under setting sun's rays, the small man grimaced.

"Sforza's dog — the agent!"

IX

Pointing his gun, which was still belching smoke, at Philipppo, Abel quietly asked, "Won't you tell the guards to lay down their weapons quietly, brother?" The massacre in the cathedral was nearly over. The priest's blue eyes were filled with pain as he gazed down at the attendants engulfed in a pool of blood. "And please move away from Their Holinesses. I won't let you butcher anymore."

"Bwah hah hah! You say such naive things," Philipppo smiled as he gestured to the soldiers who had turned their guns on the new intruder. "Whether they survive or die here, all the people in this city are going to die eventually. You'd better run away at once, agent, if you don't want to get involved. Go on!"

A high-pitched echo split the air, overlapping the tail end of the inquisitor's speech. Unexpectedly, the wire pick, thrown with only a simple snap of the wrist, caught the priest's face dead on. It was such a brilliant blow that the sound of the bone being gouged was audible—but what was thought to be the crackling sound of bone really was the sound of marble breaking. The pick had thrust deeply between the eyebrows of a marble statue of the baby Jesus, and the silver-haired priest who had been in front of it disappeared like an illusionist's trick.

"Bwah! Where is he?" Philipppo said, gasping.

"Won't you be quiet, brother?" Abel's voice echoed like the sound of a gun hammer flustering inside the inquisitor's ear, and he peered at the back of the inquisitor's head with eyes as cold as a winter lake. "What do you mean all the people in this city will die?"

"Th-that missile," Philipppo replied. With an ominous smile, he snuck a peek at the gun pressed to his temple. "It means that by using that missile, we'll kill all the people in this city. Heh heh!"

"What do you mean? Aren't you planning to dismantle that and let

the army invade?" asked Abel.

Abel received the dreadful response he had feared. "Dismantle? Invade? Ha! We won't do anything so troublesome," Philippo scoffed. "We're not going to dismantle it—we're going to blow it up in this city!" At the same time that his tone of voice had drastically changed, Philippe's hand moved with a deftness that was uncharacteristic of him, and he forcefully threw the wire pick he'd kept hidden. The pick's destination was the still-unconscious Alessandro and Alfonso, who was using Alessandro as a shield.

"D-damn!" shouted Abel.

The percussion revolver spat out bullets with a roar. The next instant, the wire pick that was launched toward the boy Pope's heart burst apart with a high-pitched sound. But by that time, Philippe's round fingers were clutching Abel's arm with terrifying strength. "Bwah hah hah hah! Hey, hey, naive agent!" Philippo shouted.

Suddenly, Abel's hair began to stand on end as three hundred thousand volts of electric current assaulted his entire body. Receiving a voltage that was four hundred times that of the Energizer bunny's power, his six-foot-plus-tall body flew backward.

"Bwah hah hah hah! Critical hit!" Philippo laughed.

Abel's body fell and convulsed erratically as smoke danced off it. The small man ran over and mercilessly trod on the priests face, although the agent still couldn't breathe. "Isn't it a pity, agent? You shouldn't underestimate . . . Now, what were we talking about? Ah, yes, yes. We were talking about that missile."

Abel moved only his eyeballs and made his mouth quiver as if he wanted to say something.

As he dug his fingernail into Abel's temple, Philippo dramatically threw back his head. "We'll blow up the missile in this city as soon as we've evacuated. After we wipe out the maggots with poisonous gas, we've arranged for our troops outside to enter the castle at their leisure. We should've done that from the beginning."

"There are also regular citizens ... in this city," Abel struggled to articulate as his face was still under Philippe's foot. "I-it's nothing to do with them."

"Nobody will know about the ignorant citizens," Philippo explained. "In the public announcement, we'll say that the heretics accidentally leaked the poisonous gas they made, and that it ended up killing them and the citizens. Ah, that face. Are you chagrined? You are chagrined, aren't you?" Philippo snickered, revealing a new pick between his fingers. After he deliberately turned Abel's face upward so he could face his next fate, Philippo grinned as if gloating. "Well, I guess I'll put you out of your misery now. Die slowly like a dog while ruminating on your chagrin."

As he was raising the pick to eye height, Philippo suddenly shrieked when he felt something thin stick into the back of his hand. The inquisitor stared hard at the chakram with the delicate carving — the circular blade that was stuck deep into his skin. When he saw the bright red blood gush from his hand, he lost all control and bent backward in agony. "Aieeeeeee! My hand! My haaannndddd!"

"Hey, that's a cool accessory for you, round eel. But, speaking frankly, it really doesn't suit you," Leon mocked cheerfully. The large man whose swarthy face was grinning appeared beside the altar before anyone had noticed.

Several soldiers abruptly pointed their guns toward Leon's dauntlessly smiling face, but they were forced to drop their arms after being struck by bullets fired just before they pulled their triggers.

"Point thirty-three seconds late," Tres, the short shadow standing next to the large man, muttered unemotionally as a heavy machine gun for use on tanks spewed fiendish gunpowder from his hip.



"Leon! Tres!" Abel exclaimed.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, Bungler," replied Father Leon Garcia, waving his fingers. "The truth is, we intended to come sooner, but it took a little time to dry my clothes."

"I recommend saving unnecessary conversation for later, Dandelion," interrupted Tres in a hardened voice. As he intimidated the soldiers with his machine gun, the short priest stared unemotionally at the giant. "In the current situation, His Holiness' security and rescue are our first priority."

"I know that. Really—interfering with a person being cool..." Leon glared sideways at Father Tres Iqus' masklike face, but he obeyed what Tres had said. Haphazardly picking up his comrade from the floor, Leon jutted his jaw at the boy Pope, who was still unconscious. "Abel, you take care of His Holiness. Escape outside the city before us. The gunman and I somehow will take care of the missile."

As he struggled to stand, Abel spoke desperately: "P-please wait a minute. That . . . I'll get that... Vaclav."

"You're no use in that shape. Regardless of whether you say you're okay, I won't listen," said Leon. He tried to reject his comrade's request, but Leon couldn't help but notice that Abel's eyes beneath his glasses were unusually serious. Shrugging, Leon said, "All right. You can return to the castle. The gunman and I—"

"I'm your opponent, hairball!" shouted Philippe like a deep, dark voice echoing from hell. His lips twisted in anger as he finally pulled the chakram out of his hand. "Interfering with me, not once but twice! I'm infuriated!"

Addressing his comrade, who'd hefted his gun, Dandelion broke out in an unholy smile. "Hey, Tres, don't interfere. I'll be this idiot's opponent," said Leon. "This time won't go like yesterday. Get ready, because I'm going to broil you, you round eel!"

"You can't move from here!" Havel scolded the officers trying to

leave the underground hall in a sharp voice. Softening his tone slightly, he expounded on his explanation. "As long as the Vatican doesn't dispose of this missile, they can't move their army. Because of that, they're trying to lure you to the surface and attack underground when we're short-handed. Therefore—"

"Get out of the way, Havel!" bellowed an irritated officer who also held the title of baron. "Our relatives are going to the cathedral. Are you telling us to allow our families to be killed before our eyes?"

"I'm not saying that—I'm simply telling you to avoid doing anything stupid that might help them with their plan," Havel replied.

"Stupid? Are you, with the social standing of a commoner, calling us stupid?" the baron shouted angrily, his face turning bright red.

The officers of the Neue Vatican army chiefly consisted of second and third sons of common lords in the area around Bohemia. To them, it was an unpleasant experience to be ordered around by anyone, but there was nothing worse than being ordered around by an unknown priest of doubtful origin.

"No matter what you say, we're going to the cathedral! Cowards can stay here!" proclaimed the officer. After the baron rebuked Havel, he led the officers out of the underground hall.

Watching them leave, Havel's shoulders slumped powerlessly. "It's over . . ."

The missile's ominous silhouette towered overhead toward the dark ceiling. Havel was certain that as long as he had the missile, the Vatican wouldn't be able to lay a hand on Brno. No matter how bad the situation got, if they just protected this abominable thing, they couldn't be beaten. If they bought time above ground and kept the alignment of the surrounding lords, they could amass enough strength in this castle to hold out against Rome. Where those of true faith gathered was the real dwelling of God—but that notion already seemed to be fading like a dream.

"Aren't you going?" asked Havel, dropping his eyes to the ground. He noticed there were people other than himself in the hall. Dozens

of boy soldiers wearing shabby clothing glared at the priest as if they wanted to complain.

"Why are you lingering? The Bureau of Inquisition will attack here soon. Escape quickly!" urged Havel.

"I-if you're staying behind, Father, we'll stay, too," announced the boy carrying a machine gun, speaking on behalf of his companions.

"Father, we're staying with you. We won't lose—even without those nobles," said a boy.

"Yeah. We didn't come with the nobles. We came here because you were here, Father," said another boy.

"We can't run away and abandon you now, Father," said another.

Surveying the boys talking to one another in strong rustic accents, Havel sighed. In the end, he hadn't been able to do anything for them. On the contrary, he'd dragged the beloved children into a predicament. He knew he'd be the first one to be judged for this incident. "Everybody, please listen . . ." Suppressing what was swelling up in his heart, Havel stopped speaking. He regarded each of the boy's faces and said solemnly, "We will lose."

The sound of gasps reverberated throughout the dark hall.

The priest continued delivering his speech to the boys who grew stiffer with each incomprehensible word. "The Bureau of Inquisition will come here soon to dismantle this bomb. When that's finished, the siege army will invade. The outcome already is decided."

The boys shouted with beseeching eyes as though they were infuriated that a deal had been broken.

"B-but, Father!" exclaimed a boy.

"Father, didn't you say that the righteous can't lose—that God will be our ally if we do the right thing? Was that a lie?" said another boy.

The one-armed priest, still downcast, bit his lip. "Blessed are the

poor" were the words he'd shared with them before. He'd taught them that regardless of whether you're poor or weak, you should do the right thing because God is always watching—and this was the result. What could he say to them now, when it was too late? Should he encourage them—or apologize? There was only one thing he could say now.

"That's a lie," said Havel, ignoring the boys' faces, which looked more stunned with every word he uttered. "There is no God. We will lose—and when we lose, we'll be captured by the church army or killed. If you want to survive, you must run away."

Taking the hand of one of the boys, the priest placed a small metal object into the boy's palm and made a fist around the boy's hand. "This is the key to the storehouse. If you take food and goods and run away, you shouldn't find yourself in trouble for a while. During that time, please find a tranquil place."

"You liar!" jeered one of the boys as hot tears trickled down his face.

"You deceived us, you fake priest! You lied to us and made us do what you said!" shouted another boy.

Havel took their abuse silently without bothering to wipe the spit from his cheek. His eyes devoid of emotion, he fended off stares burning with anger.

"Let's go, everybody. Who wants to die in a place like this?" asked the boy with the machine gun. Taking their cue from the boy leader who'd turned on his heel, the other boys followed, running as fast as they could, hurling slander at Havel on their way out.

"This is good," Havel lamented in a whisper. Now, the boys would escape the city or choose to throw down their weapons and surrender. But it would take at least a few hours for them and the citizens who heard their story to escape safely. If the church army began attacking during that time, everything would be over. Havel had to buy time by any means. *But can I buy time now?* he wondered to himself. Because there had been a commotion in the cathedral, the Bureau of Inquisition surely had already moved. *With my body missing its right arm, and being unable to use the trump card and the*

invisibility camouflage, how in the world can I buy time? Havel simply had to do it. He was the one who had caused the incident earlier in the day, so it was the only way.

Suddenly, a quiet voice echoed as if speaking out into the nighttime forest. "They say God ordered us thus: 'My people, conquer, attack, and destroy any heretics.'"

Havel hadn't seen the slender woman whose shadow stood in the doorway appear.

Reflecting the illumination in both silver-body-armor-wrapped hands was a moon blade that looked like two crescent moons combined. As she twirled the strangely beautiful but deadly weapon in her hands, the nun — Inquisitor Sister Paula — quietly recited a prayer: "Kill the men. Kill the women. Kill the children. Kill the infants. The cattle, and the sheep, and the camels, and the donkeys, kill, kill, kill. Amen."

Havel's face went blank. Barely tilting his body, he lifted his left arm parallel to his body axis. The moment the priest kicked the floor, the nun's body leapt high. The shock wave produced from her hand blade caused it to graze her feet and then gouge a deep hole in the wall.

In order to evade a kicking attack, Havel threw his thin body backward, but the blades attached to the inquisitor's boots still thrashed his face. If he'd moved backward a half second slower, the top of his head would have undoubtedly been split in two. Meanwhile, the nun's body had landed and was spinning like a top. Her right arm, pliant as a whip, flung the moon blade, which Havel dodged using intricate footwork. Still spinning like a windmill, the nun thrust the left weapon, grasped in her opposite hand, toward her opponent's chest. Havel quickly raised his left sleeve, which ripped loudly—and with unbelievable speed and sharpness, the priest was pinned to the edge of the wall.

Havel's cassock already was torn to shreds and subcutaneous circulation medicine was gushing from everywhere. Regardless of whether the odds moved in his favor, victory would be doubtful. Indeed, the moniker "Lady of Death" wasn't for show.

"However!" Havel proclaimed. He couldn't avoid the moon blade or the rate of its discharge, but by stepping directly in front of its aim, he daringly shortened the distance. At the same time, he thrust his hand blade toward the blade hurtling overhead.

When the high-pitched clang echoed across the hall, the Lady of Death's expression changed. Know Faith's hand blade had successfully broken the moon blade and slashed the nun's throat with the speed of a snake. Deprived of her favorite dark weapon, Paula couldn't thwart the attack.

"What?" exclaimed Havel, whose eyes had widened in shock.

Paula had thrown away her dark weapon and had firmly caught Havel's hand blade, which could pierce an iron plate. "The other day, you said that I was a genius user of dark weapons, but that was half right and half wrong," the Lady of Death coldly pointed out, still restraining Havel with one arm as he struggled with all his might. "I use dark weapons to awaken fear in sinners and in order to make heretics feel fear before they die. I use them for nothing more than making them realize the weight of their sins. The truth is..."

Havel's eyes bulged out as his fist was crushed by the nun's slender hand.

"My specialty is empty-handed combat," Paula continued.

Subcutaneous circulation drug spouted up and splattered the floor like rain. The priest, whose fist had crumbled under the nun's uncanny strength, arced backward.

"God's punishment," Paula mumbled as she thrust both fists into the pit of Havel's stomach and rotated them so the force inflicted a horrible blow to the priest's core.

Hakkei was a fighting technique that concentrated the strength produced by the whole body's muscular motion into one spot. After being propelled more than thirty feet to a corner of the hall and hitting the wall, Havel's cassock burst open as if it had taken a direct hit from a tank cannon. His shape-memory plastic muscles

were shredded and were exposed by cracks in his snakelike skin that had cruelly split.

"I've finished disposing of Vaclav Havel. The only thing left is to deal with the missile," Paula said. Without giving a second glance toward the priest, whose body wasn't moving but was trailing with smoke, Paula walked toward the center of the hall. She slid her fingers along the machinery and tools on the control console as though she were very familiar with them, and after a few moments, lamps that had been turned off began to light up one after the other.

"P-please, sister," Havel pleaded, directing his words toward Paula's turned back. His main output lines already had been destroyed, and his life-support subcircuits were being depleted merely by talking, but the priest couldn't stop. "A while... Won't you wait a while to disarm it? Our defeat already is certain. Please, give us the chance to surrender before the army invades."

As her fingers danced over the console, the Lady of Death's long, slitted eyes peered at the dying priest. "I don't understand what you're saying. Our army won't invade—there's no need for that."

"No need? What do you mean?" Havel asked suspiciously.

"Because we won't leave one heretic alive. We'll explode this missile here," Paula replied curtly.

Havel's face went flush, twisting in shock and fear.

The evening sun shone down through the hall's ceiling, which opened with a noise. Looking up at the hole, which was supposed to serve as the missile's firing port, Paula matter-of-factly added, "If we explode this missile, the hydrocyanic acid gas will spread throughout the castle and the entire city. In a half an hour, the extermination of the heretics will be complete."

"Th-that's . . ." Havel's blood-smeared mouth trembled in despair. He gathered his strength to entreat the nun who was adjusting the gauges. "P-please wait, sister. There are ordinary citizens here! Those—

"Heretics have no right to live," Paula said calmly as she continued to concentrate on the console. "There is a rule that God and faith move this world. We of the Vatican are wardens to make that system function smoothly. Therefore, those who oppose us are traitors."

Paula's demeanor revealed her indifference and signaled neither feelings of guilt nor a guilty conscience. She didn't even seem bloodthirsty. Acting as though she had merely drawn an equation on a blackboard, Paula sentenced tens of thousands of people to death. "They who hinder the normal application of the rule are trash, and you have to clean up trash quickly," she said.

"That's . . . trash . . . ?" said the dying priest collapsed in a pool of blood. "Y-you call them trash? And God and faith are no more than rules?"

"That's right, God is order—He is law. And He is this real world itself because God is omniscient and omnipotent. This world, which is Gods creation, always should be managed correctly," Paula explained.

"Order . . . law . . ." muttered Havel. Still prostrate, he asked himself, *Then what is God? If God approves of the strong eating the weak, what happened to justice? Is she saying that faith ignores ideals being defeated by reality?* Actually, wasn't what was happening before his eyes proof of that? Those who sincerely believed in God would be cruelly destroyed. If the God Havel used to believe in really existed, why didn't a miracle happen here? Why did he helplessly watch weak but righteous people being slaughtered? There was only one answer: There was no such thing as God.

"God, God, why hast thou forsaken us?" Tears of blood leaked from the corner of the priest's open eye. It could've been backflow of subcutaneous circulation fluid, but even though it had been a long time since his body had lost its tear ducts, there was little doubt that Havel was crying. After all, God wasn't anywhere. Neither ideals nor justice held any meaning whatsoever in this world. There was only reality and power. Powerless people were cruelly downtrodden and would receive no justice. That was the divine providence of this world.

"I finished setting the timer. If I destroy this console, nobody will be able to stop the self-destruct function," Paula said.

The priest digested the inquisitor's eerily calm words with deep despair and watched blankly as Paula brandished the hand blade that would destroy the control console. It already was over. The hand blade that would result in the death of tens of thousands of people and the God Havel believed in quietly swung down toward the control console.

Suddenly, a shadow in a flapping cassock fluttered down above the nun's head as if guided by the evening sun shining in. "Are you all right, Vaclav?" Abel asked.

X

"Please get away from there, Sister Paula!" Abel shouted as he landed. His gun's sights already had aligned precisely on the Lady of Death. "We, AX, are collecting this missile! We won't let you blow it up!"

"Do you think you can get away with interfering with the Bureau of Inquisition, agent?" Paula asked quietly as she regarded the new intruder from the corner of her narrowed eyes. "This is an official operation, according to the Department of Doctrine. Your obstruction of it will inconvenience not just you but also Cardinal Sforza. You continue to act, knowing that?"

"If the matter becomes public, isn't it your superior who will be inconvenienced?" asked Abel. As Abel glanced at his former colleague crumpled on the floor, he realized that Havel's injuries were more severe than he had initially thought. If Havel weren't treated quickly, he'd likely lose his life. "A cyanide compound, prohibited by church law from diversion to weapons, is loaded on this missile. If the other cardinals and common lords learn of it, it will be a huge scandal and Cardinal Medici will be put in danger."

"You learned that much?" asked Paula. All of a sudden, her tone softened and she lowered the hand she'd been holding up vigilantly. "So, what do you want, agent—to save the life of this apostate?"

"I want to save the lives of all the people in this city, including him," Abel replied as he edged closer to Havel's side. "Please get the army to recognize the bloodless surrender of Brno. You can't say you can't do it. It should be fully possible under Cardinal Medici's authority."

"Sorry, but that's unreasonable, Father Abel," Paula answered kindly, disappearing the moment the words left her mouth. "I can't let you leave here alive."

By the time he turned his head in the direction of the voice he'd heard, a hand blade spun out from the same direction, causing a gust of wind. If he hadn't accidentally raised his right arm, Abel's head would have had its carotid artery gouged out. The percussion revolver, which received the brunt of the attack in place of its owner, had its gun body amputated, revealing a sharp cross-section.

"To destroy the people of this city, leaving not one alive— that is our objective. We can't recognize a bloodless surrender now when it's too late, can we?" Paula asked, throwing her deadly hand blade at its target, who jumped back with mechanical precision. "Father Nightroad, I won't let you return alive, either, since you have knowledge of the hydrocyanic acid gas."

"Ugh!" Abel cried, his eyes reddened pondering his impending death. He parted his lips to reveal his fangs and hurriedly recited a curse: "Nanomachine 'Crusnik 02' 40% limited oper ..." But Abel's incantation wasn't finished.

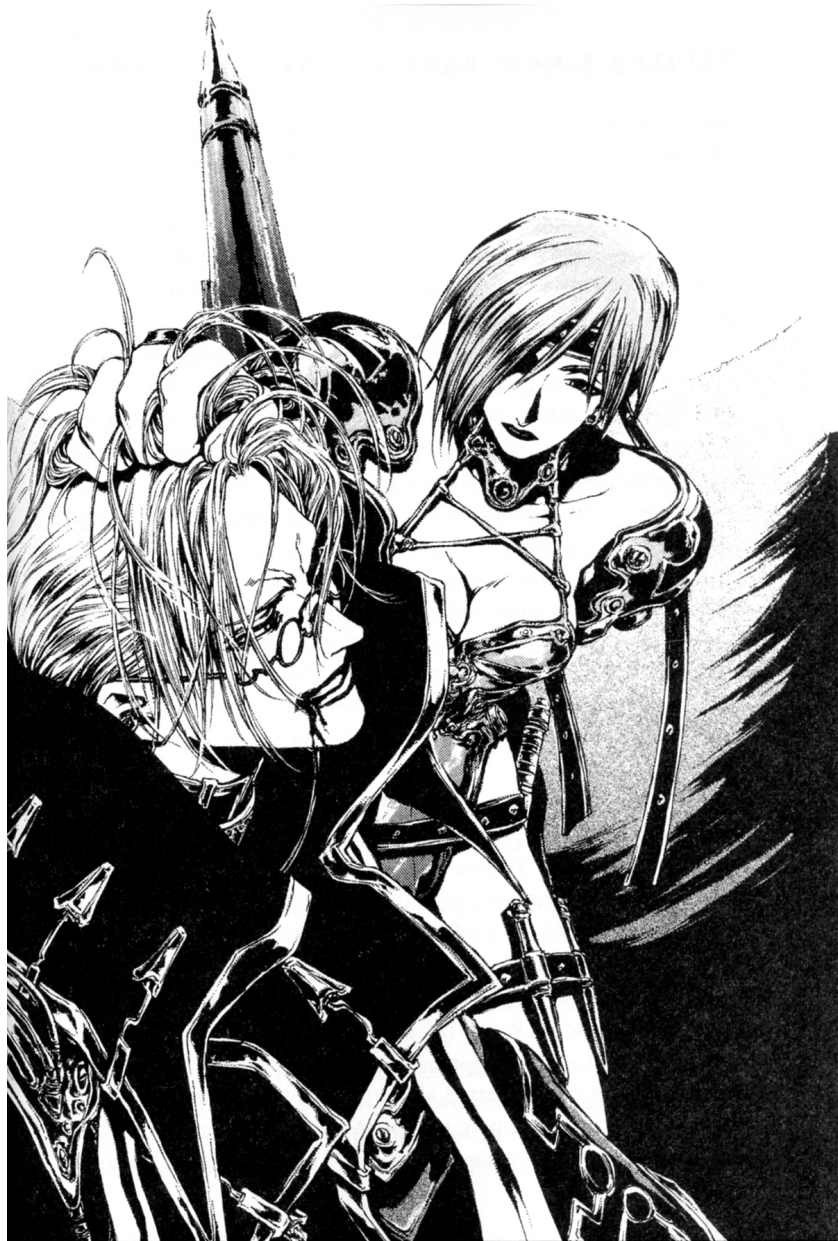
"You're slow," Paula mocked.

Right when he thought Paula's figure had been erased, a spinning kick assaulted the priest with a force that could've instantly killed a bear, causing his body to fly backward.

"Gah!" Abel cried.

"AX Agent Abel Nightroad. Code name: Crusnik," Paula said, peering down coldly at the priest writhing on the stone floor, vomiting blood. "Six feet tall. Weight: one hundred forty-three pounds. Age: unknown. Place of birth: unknown. Battle strength: assessment B-; however, battle strength assessment in the battle mode called Crusnik: A + + ."

First grasping Abel's silver hair, Paula used her strength— uncanny for such a delicate outward appearance—to lift the priest's body. "I've collected data on all you agents, and naturally, I've also analyzed your weak points. Father Nightroad, if you can't transform into Crusnik, you're worthless."



"P-please stop!" cried Havel in a weak voice as he watched the hand blade being swung toward Abel's face. "The match already is decided! Sister, useless bloodshed is an act that goes against God's will!"

"It isn't useless. I can't let this man live when he knows about the hydrocyanic acid gas. Besides ..." said Paula. The nun's face was unharmed in contrast to the priest's bloodstained face. With the clarity of an angel of death, Paula lectured the bystander. "If we're going to talk about 'God's will,' you and this man must be killed. God is this world's order—reality itself. To mercilessly annihilate those who disobey that creed is conduct that obeys God's will. Please give up soon, Father Havel." The Lady of Death's kind whisper reached the priest's ears, leaving him silent and crushed by grief. "God is power, and the reality of this world itself. You who disobeyed that power and pursued selfish ideals as you rejected holy reality are evil incarnate. There are things that are unforgivable"

"Wr-wrong!" exclaimed Abel in a weak, muffled voice, interrupting Paula's supposed words of truth. "That's wrong, Sister Paula. What you're saying is the excuse of a beaten dog!"

Paula's eyebrows pricked up. "Beaten dog?" she asked in response to Abel's babbling about irrelevant things. "Father Abel, did you call me a beaten dog? I, a disciple of God, am a beaten dog?"

"Yes, sister—you're a pathetic beaten dog," Abel insisted, slowly moving his blood-smeared lips. Although his face was twisted in severe pain, his eyes were as serene as a snowy lane. Painfully but decisively, Abel continued, "I know, because I used to be like that, too. I viewed the world with despair and mocked the ideals of those I loved. Actually, I hated them—but when I think about it now, I was a beaten dog who was afraid of fighting reality. I was a pathetic beaten dog who mocked everything. I was exactly like you are now."

Abel seemed as though he were somewhere not here and in a time far from the present. His voice was filled with deep regret and sadness, but at the same time, a yearning for beloved memories. "It's

good to look at reality. It's important to know that you don't have enough strength—but you can't let that defeat you. Paula, your theory is the theory of a beaten dog. It's only a beaten dog who'd give up fighting!"

"Thank you very much for the long and wise speech, Father, but do you understand your own situation?" asked Paula. Resting her icy eyes on her accuser, the nun laughed lightly as she gracefully but ferociously swung her hand blade. "Fine. If you can call me a beaten dog after I've beheaded you and annihilated this city, I'll acknowledge what you and Father Havel say. Be destroyed, agent!"

With enough force to turn the priest's head into a bloody lump, Paula's hand propelled through space, but the blade it gripped never reached Abel. "Ridiculous!" she exclaimed in a concerned tone. An overpowering strength that had struck her from behind had stolen her freedom. Paula unconsciously dropped Abel's body and faced the person who had pinioned her with one arm. "How can you move in that condition?" she asked, exasperated.

"Abel, earlier I denied my God, but God ended up existing after all," Havel said, laughing quietly as he kept the inquisitor bound. Because he'd diverted all his life-support backup circuits, his facial color was changing to that of a corpse. As he confronted death, his expression remained calm. "God certainly exists, but that alone isn't power. It isn't dreams, either—it's human volition that tries to bury the border between dreams and reality!"

"Vaclav!" By the time Abel shouted, Havel's torso had been sliced by a hand blade. His spinal cord was pulverized and subcutaneous circulation fluid overflowed from his ruptured closed circulation system. It was a fatal blow.

"Abel?" Havel whispered, smiling weakly, in spite of his being on the brink of death. "The rest ... the people... please..."

"You would-be suicide!" shouted Paula. By the time Havel's eyelids had lowered, Paula had succeeded in withdrawing her hand blade from the priest's body, which had ceased all function. Twisting her frame, which at last had regained its freedom, she faced her other enemy. "That took unnecessary time. You're next, Father Abel."

What the triumphant Lady of Death discovered was that there wasn't any priest on the brink of death to be found. "Nanomachine Crusnik zero-two—forty-percent limited activation—authorized!" Abel said in a somber voice before standing up quietly.

"Vaclav?" asked Abel.

Feeling as though he could hear somebody whispering, Havel slowly opened his eyes, but his field of vision was terribly clouded.

"Are you awake, Vaclav?" Abel asked with a half joyous, half distraught face.

Havel nodded to Abel. His vocal cords had lost nearly all their function, but by using all his body's strength, he finally could move his tongue. "The... inquisitor...?"

"I managed to fight her off. Father Leon and Father Tres are summoning the citizens and preparing for an unconditional surrender, and it looks as though we can avoid the church army invading the city. Understand? It's all thanks to you," Abel said.

"Surrender . . . ?" said Havel. *So, we lost after all?* As he tried to smile, Havel suddenly noticed that his head wasn't on the floor, but was propped on something soft. That something soft was somebody who had been supporting him from behind.

When that person peered into Havel's eyes, he spoke in a terribly weak voice. "A-a-are you okay, Vaclav?" asked Alessandro.

"Ah, Your Holiness. You're unharmed?" Vaclav replied, surprised. Examining the Pope's white face, Havel managed to smile. "I am as you see. We lost... and I'm very sorry for dragging Your Holiness into an absurd farce."

"F-f-forgive me, Vaclav," Alessandro pleaded as tears welled up in

his eyes. "I-if I'd been a proper Pope, this kind of thing—

"It's fine, Your Holiness. It's really fine," Havel assured the sobbing boy. Doing his best to comfort the Pope, he said, "Thanks to you, I was able to reunite with the God I'd lost sight of. I'm satisfied."

"God? S-so, Havel, you met God?" asked Alessandro.

"Yes, the Lord God whom I'd lost sight of for a long time. That wasn't so—my God was inside me." Havel had labored to deliver those few words, and it appeared as though the light of life was disappearing from his body. He could no longer see the boy's expression and had so much he wanted to say, but he didn't have the time or energy to do so. At least Havel had said the most important things to Abel. It was up to Abel to allow the seed to sprout.

"Your Holiness, you're powerless now. You couldn't save us, but that powerlessness isn't your fault," Havel said. Extending a blood-smeared arm as if he were half awake, he touched the boy's bony but warm hand. "You have volition, and as long as you have volition, your powerlessness isn't powerless. As long as you're ashamed of that, the day surely will come when the God within you will grant you power. I look forward to that day."

"Vaclav?" Alessandro called to Havel, who'd closed his eyes. He shook the priest's body as if to raise his body temperature that rapidly had waned, but once Havel's eyelids had closed, they didn't open again.



"God, guide this soul. Nobody ever loved you as much as he did. Amen," Abel said, gazing at the blood red sky as if he were going to cry.

Two hours later, the city of Brno unconditionally surrendered to the Vatican-Bohemia Combined Army, ending the Second Battle of Bohemia. According to public record, not one person was reported in the conflict.

Morning at Castle Sforza—the residence castle of the Duchess of Milan in the center of the city of Milan—came early. That meant that the lady of the castle who usually stayed in Rome had returned to her own domain—a rare thing.

This morning, when Sister Kate had visited the castle's main office, her boss—an early riser—had already been sitting at her desk. "Good morning, Caterina. How are you this morning, Professor?" Kate asked, blinking midway through the hologram as if surprised.

Caterina, who'd been under house arrest after taking responsibility for her subordinates' mismanagement, was sitting on the visitors' sofa. But although her boss had been under house arrest, wasn't it Doctor Wordsworth who should've been supervising the Department of Foreign Affairs in Rome?

"Professor, what are you doing here this early? Has something happened in Rome?" asked Kate.

"Brno fell last night," Professor replied calmly as he chewed on his unlit pipe, his face appearing ashen. "The church army triumphantly entered the city unharmed and Vaclav . . . died."

"Havel?" Kate exclaimed, aghast. She was so shaken that even her hologram visibly shook.

It was the result everyone had expected—to a certain extent. Havel had kidnapped the Pope in Prague and had been deeply involved in the subsequent uprising in Brno. No one thought he'd come back to Rome or to AX unharmed. That didn't mitigate the shock of it, though. Havel had been a companion to Professor, Caterina, and

Kate for ten years—since before AX had existed.

As Kate chewed on a finger that she'd unconsciously brought to her mouth, she glanced back at Caterina, who hadn't uttered a word since their conversation had started. Kate tried to think of things to say that would encourage her boss, although Caterina seemed less shaken than she should've been. "U-um, Caterina ..." mumbled Kate.

"So, Professor, what is the Bureau of Inquisition doing?" asked Caterina in a sweet but tough voice. The nun's attempt at solicitude ended in complete futility. When Caterina raised her head, her razor-colored eye flashed through the monocle as she questioned her subordinate in a clear tone that showed neither frailty nor wavering. "How much has Cardinal Medici grasped about the connection between us and Father Havel—or rather the traitor Vaclav Havel? Enough that he can prosecute me?"

"We've already erased all the records concerning Vaclav's status as an agent and the duties he'd accomplished until now," Professor replied in a tone as dry as Caterina's. Wearing a poker face characteristic of an Albion noble, he said, "His status as a Department of Foreign Affairs employee hasn't changed, but Your Eminence's inattentive supervision might be attacked. Even if it's not an inquisition, the hearing and judgment by the Cardinals' Council that precedes it can't be avoided."

"That can't be helped. There also was the incident in Prague. When I think about it, it was painful to hand over the stocks of hydrocyanic acid gas in exchange for Brno. If we had that, I could use it to haggle with my brother," Caterina said.

"True. However, the production records of the gas should have remained at the production site," replied Professor. "If we can get our hands on those somehow . . ."

The conversation between the Iron Woman and Professor was as calm and intelligent as always and didn't at all make Kate feel as though she'd been kicked. However, as she listened off to the side, Kate was growing increasingly troubled by something nagging at her heart—Havel was dead. A friend with whom they'd shared life and death, pain and joy, was no longer in the world, and she

couldn't understand why her colleagues weren't sad or how they could they act the same as they always did. It was certain that Caterina's and AX's situation would become dangerous, but there was still the matter of mourning the dead.

In an act of resistance, Kate intentionally interrupted Caterina and Professor as they fervently conversed about their forthcoming plans. "Um, so ... where is Havel's body?" asked Kate. He was a traitor, but treating Havel with such disrespect made him out to be more pitiful than he really was. As his only ally, Kate changed the topic to the matter her two colleagues were ignoring. "Havel had no relatives. We'll have to retrieve his body and lay it to rest somewhere. Caterina, shall we hold the funeral in Rome or here in Milan? Whichever you choose, I'll take care of the formalities."

"We are not concerned about Know Faith's body. If somebody tries to make us accept it even temporarily, refuse them," Caterina said sternly. The eye behind her monocle showed no expression and her white face was as hard as porcelain. "Father Vaclav Havel was my subordinate, but now he's merely a traitor. No matter what kind of opinion the Department of Doctrine has concerning those who died in the Battle of Brno, we cannot bury his body with our hands. Lump him in and deal with him like the other war dead."

"P-please wait, Caterina!" Kate pleaded as she beat on her desk, causing her hologram to flicker. "Wasn't Havel like our family? We're pathetic if we don't mourn him."

"It can't be helped, Kate," answered Professor. As if to protect Caterina, who walked silently toward the window, from further prodding, Wordsworth shook his head. "As it stands, Cardinal Medici and the Bureau of Inquisition are trying to push the responsibility for this rebellion on Cardinal Sforza. At this time, we can't publicize the relationship between Vaclav and AX, so please give up on the topic."

"Th-that's . . . !" Kate's meek face stiffened at Professor's answer. She turned toward her boss as if she were seeking a second opinion; however, Caterina didn't give the nun a second glance.

After again taking her seat at the desk, Caterina relayed a succinct

order to Professor: "Doctor Wordsworth, return to Rome at once, and absolutely do not take your eyes off the Pope's palace. Be sure to submit detailed reports concerning the actions of Cardinal Medici and the Bureau of Inquisition, as well."

Bowing gracefully, Professor stood up. "Understood." He was about to leave the room when he called the nun as if suddenly he'd remembered something. "That's right, Kate—if it's not too much trouble, would you arrange for a train? Special class, if possible—a single room would be good. Because if I go to the station from here, I'll probably make it in time for the next express."

"Very good," Kate replied firmly before dissolving her hologram from the office. She didn't salute Caterina before she left because if she'd opened her mouth again, Kate didn't know what she would say to her. But amid her feelings of irritation, and before she severed her contact with the office's camera circuits, Kate noticed that she'd forgotten one more thing—a matter requiring a decision.

Now that I think about it, I should've reported on Hugue's condition ... Remembering the progress report that had come from the hospital in Rome, Kate wavered for a moment. She hesitated to speak to her superior now and wondered whether she should send a written report instead. Ultimately, she revisited the cameras, reinserting the microphone switch. After all, it was a report about an agent, and it had to be delivered directly and orally. Kate still hadn't dared to rematerialize, though — perhaps because of the trouble it would require, but also because she was reluctant to show her face to Caterina so soon.

Professor had long since left and only a slender shadow remained in the office, seated at the desk. "Your Eminence, I'm very sorry — I forgot one thing." Kate tried to call her superior without materializing, but she couldn't say the words out loud.

Iron Woman was sitting alone in the same position beyond the desk that she had been in a little while earlier. As if Caterina's thoughts were consumed by the secret feud between half siblings that soon would resume, her steely eyes stared at the desk without blinking. Her overall demeanor left no question that her nickname couldn't have been more appropriate. "Vaclav!" she cried as clear droplets

slid down her faintly trembling cheeks.

That morning, when Dietrich had gone up to the seventh floor study between the third and fourth floor of Thurm, a guest had arrived there before him. Near the window, from where moonlight seemed to eternally beam in, Wizard thumbed through the morning newspaper.

"Good morning, Isaak. Did an interesting article get printed?" asked Dietrich.

"'The winner always writes the loser's history, and the survivors always write the history of the dead'—Lessing," Isaak recited. "The Battle of Brno is over, Puppeteer." His black hair falling to his waist, Isaak glanced at his comrade's smiling face, before once again dropping his eyes to the morning paper. A needle-like cigarillo scrupulously inserted between his glove-covered fingers trailed purple smoke as he proclaimed, "It's a total victory for the Vatican. Alfonso d'Este is missing. The church army invaded the city bloodlessly."

"Bloodlessly? That isn't any fun. According to your calculations, weren't thirty thousand people supposed to die?" asked Dietrich.

Smiling wryly at Dietrich's innocent utterance, the longhaired man folded the newspaper. As he moved his eyes upward inside their flat eyelids, Isaak smiled cheerfully—a rare thing for him. "Now that the settlement of the Silent Noise operation is over, the outcome has turned out to be slightly different than planned, but it's well within the permissible scope."

"Permissible scope? Should you be saying such an optimistic thing, Isaak? There also are those among the other eight-threes who are questioning this matter," Dietrich replied. As he sipped the espresso brought in by an unidentified maid, Puppeteer frowned, but his

eyes continued to smile like a cat playing with a mouse. "Ice Witch, for example. At the meeting she said, 'Isaak, wasn't it your clumsiness that destroyed Neue Vatican before our very eyes?'"

"Hmph! Her opinion is right. The fact that the Neue Vatican was destroyed certainly was my responsibility," Isaak admitted. After snuffing out his cigarillo in the ashtray, he gazed at the coffee cup still at his mouth and whispered in a tone that seemed to lecture his reflection in the brownish-black surface. "Except that it's rather unexpected for the Neue Vatican matter to be blamed on clumsiness. That was an investment—an investment intended to lead to the next success. No kind of business can attain success by neglecting investment. It seems I didn't get the Ice Witch to understand that, but—

"Say, Isaak?" Dietrich said, grinning as he peered into his companion's face. "Shall I guess what you intend to do next?"

Wizard pressed the cigarillo deeper into the ashtray, skillfully raising only one eyebrow. "Do you know what I intend to do?"

Puppeteer nodded, filled with self-confidence. "Of course I know. You'll do something quite terrible, right?"

Wizard's thin lips stretched into a small smile in response to the extremely straightforward answer. He rested his chin on his laced fingers, and his eyes, which never shone, narrowed like those of a sated demon. "As you say, Puppeteer. I'm now going to do something quite terrible."

Side Story – Guns ‘n’ Swords

‘My lust shall be satisfied upon them;

I will draw my sword, my hand shall destroy them.

- Exodus 15:9

I

The scream was drowned out by the thunderclap, rendering it inaudible.

Dropping the sabre he'd brandished into a pool of water, the large policeman crumpled to the stone pavement. He screamed like a woman because his hand had been broken completely and was twisted at a weird angle. As he slid backward trying to escape the shadow slowly edging toward him, the deadly weapon cocked and turned, directly hitting his chin.

Water splashed high where the huge body fell onto the street with a silent scream. The scattered showers, which hadn't ceased since sunset, suddenly got much stronger. As the rain intensified, the evil shadow with uncannily flashing green eyes darted through the dark after a fresh victim, finding one more policeman in his path.

The cop slid his hand toward the location of his handgun. His eyes bulged in wonder as he tried to pull the trigger, but the long iron staff that the shadow grasped revolved, cutting through the rainy night more quickly than the cop had expected. "C-crazy! T-too fast!" he stammered.

Thunder rumbled as though heaven had fallen, casting a white glow on the dark streets. Against a backdrop of only light and shadow, the evil weapon gleamed as it reflected the lightning's flash. By the time the thunder's echoes had disappeared into the night air, the handgun that had been launched from the cop's hands was rolling on the stone pavement.

"Argh!" Having lost his only hope, the policeman, still clumsily sitting on his butt, gnashed his teeth. He widened his eyes in horror as the iron staff raised high above his head. If he took one blow from the weapon on his crown, his skull and all its contents would be crushed. As he struggled to vocalize his overwhelming terror

with a scream, the policeman felt a gust of wind rush over the top of his head. He timidly raised his eyes, wet with tears, to discover that death hadn't visited—the iron staff had stopped as if stuck in the air.

In the face of the evil shadow that revealed itself with a lightning flash, dark green eyes burned like phosphorescence. "Disappear—and don't follow me again. The next time we meet, I'll kill you for sure," said Hugue in a low, corpselike voice as he crept into the depths of the night.

"Eek!" cried the policeman. Compared to the sound of the rain, which was cascading like a waterfall, his voice was rather quiet. Finally picking himself up from the ground, he scurried down the street, stumbling along the way. He continued to run desperately, sighing faintly as he kept an eye on the figure behind him. Casually combing back his soaked blond hair, the cop peered down in horror at the victims on the ground. Ten policemen were unconscious, each with arms or legs broken. Regardless of whether they regained consciousness, his comrades wouldn't be able to do anything except scream.

A look of pity dwelled in Hugue's green eyes as he surveyed the cruel sight. But as he spun the iron staff in his hands unemotionally, he walked off through the streets as though nothing had happened. Stopping, he glanced at the wall next to him, narrowing his eyes slightly. A notice with the photograph of a young man was posted on the wall. "Invasion of Antwerp Police Commissioner's Mansion—Hugue de Watteau. Reward for whomever captures him, dead or alive," read Hugue. His throat rumbled softly as he looked at the notice more closely. Between the sparsely sprouted beard stubble, his thin lips twisted as if mocking somebody. "Terrorist? Yeah, it's just like they say."

Hugue shredded the notice, mercilessly grinding it into the wet stone pavement with his foot before once again embarking into the rain. He had no destination and traveled at that kind of unreliable pace maintained by those whose sole objective was to wander.

What interrupted Hugue's stride this time was a strangely monotone voice that belonged to a short shadow that was blocking his way

forward. "What are you doing here, Father Watteau?" asked Tres.

Hugue's eyes, which had grown as large as glass balls, intently fixed on the man's thin, haggard face.

The priest, donning a clean cassock without one chink, gazed expressionlessly at the silent man as he repeated his question. "I asked what you were doing in a place like this, Father Watteau. Your duty doesn't have anything to do with the city of Brussels. If you have a special reason to be outside your operation zone, I request you disclose it," Tres urged.

"It's none of your business what I'm doing, Gunslinger," Hugue replied firmly, raising his shadowed face. Hugue had been camping for the past week and was far from meals. He hadn't gotten much sleep, either, which had caused his normally pale face to turn a ghostly stark white. Still, his low voice resounded clearly in spite of the fierce rain. "I'm investigating an incident in Amsterdam now. My current business is connected to that investigation, so I came to this city. Please don't interfere, Father Iqus."

"Negative. You've been relieved of your duty to investigate the old church incident in Amsterdam and have received alternate orders. I request that you leave Brussels at once and return to Rome," Tres directed.

A dry laugh escaped from Hugue's throat. "Return to Rome? Return?" he asked. Glancing back at the other priest, who was still staring at him blankly, Hugue laughed once more—but his truthful eyes certainly weren't laughing. Composing himself, he said earnestly, "There's nowhere for me to return to anymore." A wild light still brightening his eyes, he thrust out his jaw. "I can't go back to Rome anymore—and I'll quit AX, too. Go back and tell the Duchess of Milan, Gunslinger."

"At present, Brussels is under martial law," Gunslinger— Father Tres Iqus—replied, lacking warmth. As if announcing the result of a chemistry experiment, he added, "The vampires in this city, including an individual named Thierry Darsus and his clan, are wary and sense your approach. They've mobilized all the city police. The probability that you can capture or destroy Darsus is at

most no more than point zero six percent. Operation actions are meaningless as well as fatal."

"I know—I'm not so much a fool that I don't know that," Hugue replied, screwing his mouth self-mockingly. Turning around, he gazed gloomily at the policemen he'd defeated earlier. They'd been strictly ordered to use any means necessary to capture Hugue, and the struggle to deplete his battle strength without killing him caused extreme exhaustion. It already had been one week since he'd arrived in Brussels and Hugue's mental and physical strength were weakening as a result of a lifestyle that meant rarely eating or sleeping. He could already see his future.

Hugue's body had been soaked by rain and his survival instincts had been paralyzed. As he tried to sort through his thoughts, the young man's eyes went blank like a dead man's. *Family, castle, fiancée—I have nothing.* He'd lost everything—both a place to go home to and the meaning of life—and felt he had no reason to go on living. He didn't expect to live an unreasonably long time, but he was rather afraid of doing so after carrying out his revenge. Hugue was afraid of spending his life alone and in mourning with no place to go. "Let me go, Father Iqus." Turning his back on his silent comrade, Hugue exhaled heavily, declaring over his shoulder, "I have nothing to do with the Duchess of Milan or the Vatican anymore. I'm already—"

"Securing you is the Duchess of Milan's top order," Tres interrupted with no sign of hurt feelings in his voice. At the same time, there was a small, unmistakably metallic noise—the ring of a handgun's firing hammer being lifted. "Leaving you alone more than this will prove to be a big disadvantage to the Duchess of Milan's political situation. If you insist on refusing to go back with me, it's possible that I'll choose to shoot you to death."

The faint water noise Hugue heard in the background was the sound of ruin bouncing off the handgun pointed at him. As he listened over his shoulder to Tres' flat, somewhat inhuman pronouncement of punishment, his mouth relaxed slightly. Barely gripping his iron staff, Hugue teased, "Shoot me to death? Can you kill me, Gunslinger?"

"This is the final confirmation, Sword Dancer," Tres pronounced.

Beyond the screen of rain, Hugue heard the sound of the safety catch being released.

Tres' voice no longer sounded cold and as if he were reminding Hugue of his fate—it instead rang as if prideful for following the proper procedure. "Will you return to Rome with me, or do you intend to keep refusing my order to return and stay in Brussels? Disclose your answer."

"I can't return to Rome . . . again," Hugue mumbled with little emotion. With his blond hair stuck flat against his head, he turned and flashed a gruesome smile. "Go back and tell the Duchess of Milan that Sword Dancer will kill all of them—and will never see her again."



All of a sudden, the clank of a sword being drawn overlapped with the sound of a gunshot. Splashes from bullets striking near Hugue's feet splattered one after the other as he jumped to avoid being hit. And the stone pavement blasted apart wherever it was gouged by bullets, causing stony fragments to hurtle toward the swordsman from all directions. Hugue didn't counterattack, though. Dodging bullets by a hair with his sword drawn from its scabbard, he thrashed through the neighboring streetlamp. The moment Tres edged away from the streetlamp that was falling toward him, Hugue's body balled up, literally rolling into a side street.

"You won't get away, Sword Dancer!" shouted Tres.

Listening to Tres' voice trailing behind him, Hugue exchanged his empty magazine and ran pell-mell through the unlit streets. *I can't die yet!* He remembered swearing over the sounds of ferocious thunder that he couldn't die until he killed the tribe—the one who'd stolen his sister before his eyes—ten years ago. Was it his turbid thoughts or his power of concentration, diminished by exhaustion, that was leading Hugue into danger? It was when Hugue approached the corner of a twisted alley and realized that he was paying attention only to what was behind him that he became aware of his own naiveté.

"Caught target within effective firing range. Open fire," Tres shouted.

If Hugue had heard the monotone voice over the stone wall right next to him and jumped back a second later, Hugue's body undoubtedly would've been torn apart and scattered into meat fragments. Following the rain of bullets that grazed the tip of his nose, a short shadow wrapped in a flawless cassock appeared, breaking through the wall.

"Target in sight," announced Tres. Dusty with stucco, the killing machine raised his gun. The red light of the laser sight burst forth, lighting up the left side of Hugue's chest. "Fire!"

The Jericho M-13 Deus Irae—the largest battle handgun in the world—bared its thirty-millimeter fangs in the air toward Hugue,

who instinctively blocked his body with his sword.

However, it was Tres' body that was thrown backward by a spray of bullets that fired sideways. His body, close to four hundred forty pounds, was forced to the side by countless rounds that struck him with savage speed, and his cassock, which had been turned into a honeycomb, scattered around the area like rags.

"Get on, Father Watteau!" said a voice. Seconds later, the sound of an engine roared like a beast, followed by a dazzling white flash that nearly blinded Hugue. Then, a motorbike sped from the alley, causing water to spray up on either side of it, and came to a sudden stop next to the priest, who still didn't understand what had happened. "What are you doing? Get on — hurry!"

The young man motioned toward the tandem seat with his chin. His face was obscured by his black raincoat and goggles as he shouted angrily, engaging the clutch with his tall leather boots. "I'm your ally — at least for now!"

Hugue, still silent, didn't jump onto the seat because he believed that the man in black was his ally, rather because a beam of red light was rising, pushing through the rubble into the stream of rain. In the darkness, the laser sight drew a line, catching Hugue and his rescuer.

"Go!" Hugue shouted, hurling a dagger drawn from its sheath toward the short figure. The motorbike took off so powerfully that it could've taken flight, but the bullet narrowly missed the engine muffler because the dagger diverted the shot.

"Hang on tight, Father Hugue!" yelled the man.

Hugue had thought that the young man gripping the handlebars was shouting something, but he couldn't catch his voice, which was drowned out by the sound of the torrential downpour.

II

Like its name "Brouscella"—or "fortress in the middle of the swamp"—Brussels, located in the middle of former river paths that entwined the plains like net holes, had been vital for commerce since long ago. Although Brussels glorified its reputation as the center of economic activity—from its production of woolen cloth and trade in precious metals to its nexus of various kinds of national systems—multiple factions aware of its strategic value instigated numerous wars around the region. The flames of war occurred so frequently that the ground had absorbed a lot of blood over the years. At present, Brussels was an independent, free city that publicly enjoyed peace and liberty as the leading power of the Four Cities Alliance.

"First, let me introduce myself—I'm George Roddenbach. As you see, I'm a man—age thirty—and a bachelor living in Brussels. As I told you a little while ago, my occupation is public prosecutor, Brussels District Prosecutors Bureau, Fourth Division. I'm in charge of legal action against organized crime by the mafia or syndicates," the young man introduced himself rapidly, as if declaring his opinion before a judge.

Dim gaslights illuminated one cozy room of a farmhouse located on the northern outskirts of Brussels. The place definitely wasn't a courtroom, but it wasn't a prison, either. It was clear that it wasn't in use at the moment as there were no animals to be seen in the barn, and thanks to the rain, the expansive garden with nobody in it was quickly becoming a swamp.

"This is a safe house used by the Prosecutors Bureau for protecting witnesses. As long as you're here, I can guarantee your physical safety, Father Watteau," George said.

"Why did you rescue me?" asked Hugue, neglecting to shake the hand extended to him. The drops falling from his clothes were

creating a small pool of water on the floor, but he walked around the room as if he didn't care, checking under the carpet and between the curtains. "Am I not being hunted as a terrorist? What reason could somebody from the authorities—and a prosecutor at that—have for bringing me to a place like this?"

"It is correct that at present you're being pursued as a named suspect, but to call you a terrorist is a mistake. Carrel van der Verf of Amsterdam, Hans Memlink of Antwerp . . . the ones you put your hands on all were vampires and the leaders of Count Four. Is attacking and killing them terrorism?" asked George.

Hugue didn't answer the prosecutors question; the priest's eyes merely sparkled brightly.

Sensing that he'd received his answer silently, Roddenbach continued: "We've been searching for your whereabouts since the disturbance occurred in Amsterdam. We barely picked you up when you came walking into Brussels, but prosecutors have keen eyes."

"Vampires seem to be walking around openly despite that," Hugue said sarcastically as his eyes studied the length of the iron staff in his hand. "Count Four—how does a *competent* prosecutor let that group run rampant?"

"Unfortunately, it's not incompetence but powerlessness," George answered bitterly, half-expecting Hugue's question. "The influence of Count Four in the city alliance is considerable. It's not just the underworld—they're also backed by the surface world.

We've tried to take them down numerous times, but whenever we have, all it's done is increased the number of victims—until you appeared, Father Hugue."

As though he'd arrived at his main point at last, the public prosecutor pushed his rose-tinted glasses up the bridge of his nose and peered at the priest head on. "When you appeared, all the circumstances changed. Count Four's leadership was killed one by one, and cracks began to appear in their control. It seems that they're wasting a lot of time worrying about what to do about you, too. Dissatisfaction also is rampant among those in the Alliance

parliament who had cooperated with Count Four until now because of this sham order for martial law. This is the first time a thing like this has happened," said George.

Outside, it was still raining heavily. A cascade of raindrops poured down the window, illuminated by the fire in the single hearth. Somehow, the young prosecutor's voice managed to overpower the sound of the elements. "It's all thanks to you, Father Watteau. One more step—with only one more step, we can choke them to death! How about it? Can't we get your support from now on? We can't do battle with Count Four publicly, but we can give you information and support. And by supporting you, we're supporting the rest of their leaders. H-hey, where are you going?"

"I'm returning to the city," Hugue replied casually as he stood up and turned on his heel. He reached for the doorknob and said over his shoulder, "I'll find lodgings in the city tonight. Thank you for rescuing me, but I don't have any intention of forming a united front with you people."

"P-please wait a minute! Darsus has long since heard that you've come to this city. They're expecting you and are completely prepared. If you approach in that kind of situation, you'll be killed at once! And after you've been abandoned by the Vatican . . ." George said.

"Thanks for the warning, Prosecutor Roddenbach, but . . ." It was the voice of a man refusing somebody. Gliding his fingers over the iron staff that contained his beloved sword, Hugue added with unbeatable clarity, "I have no intention of joining you. If you want to defeat them, do something yourselves or look for somebody else to do it. Whichever option you choose should have nothing to do with me."

"Th-there is a relationship!" George shouted, but Hugue already had taken off down the corridor. Roddenbach maintained his stance with an intensity that hadn't been in his voice before. "There is a relationship! Your father, Police Inspector Jean Jacques de Watteau, was my mentor!"

The priest stopped, slowly turning around.

Noticing the suspicion in his eyes, Roddenbach carefully spoke through clenched teeth. "Ten years ago, when I was a novice prosecutor's aide, it was Inspector Watteau who took care of me, asking for nothing in return. I was a public prosecutor and he was a police chief, but he taught me that the most important role is a guardian of the law. He also told me that more important than doing our job is to be proud of being a guardian of the law. They killed him — and so cruelly."

Considering his occupation, Roddenbach undoubtedly had witnessed the scene of that tragic event. With his eyes opened wide, as if he were once more recalling the image that had been burned into his retinas, the young prosecutor shouted in anger: "I absolutely won't forgive them! Your grudge is my grudge! Can you still say it's nothing to do with you, Father Watteau? No, you can't, Hugue de Watteau!"

Hugue made no reply to George's blood-curdling revelation. As he peered down at the young man who was gazing up through his lenses at Hugue, a dark light shone in Hugue's eyes, as if he were a dead person wandering purgatory. "Is there a bath here?" Hugue asked as his black eyes scanned the room.

"Eh?" The prosecutor regarded him and inadvertently replied with another question.

Taking his hand off the doorknob, Hugue said, "I'm a little too tired tonight. For now, I only want to refresh myself with a bath—but afterward, I'd like a meal. Can you prepare it?"

Roddenbach's face lit up. "Th-then, you're . . . after all?" Unconsciously leaning forward, he tried to shake Hugue's hand, but Sword Dancer put his hand in front of his face instead and quietly shook his head.

"First, the bath and the meal—I'll listen to what you have to say in detail after that," Hugue said.

III

"The preparations are complete, Your Excellency," declared Brant. The middle-aged man had been talking for a long time on the telephone located in the VIP lounge. After he finally put down the receiver, he flashed a foxlike smile at the person occupying the sofa. "We don't need to worry any longer about when he's coming."

An aging man whose massive figure sunk deep into the lounge sofa smiled wryly at his servile but somewhat-cocky report. "I'm not particularly worried, police commissioner," said Darsus.

A blue veil of darkness already had fallen on the airport, which was visible from the ship's broadside window. As he gazed at the lights guiding the airship into the hangar, wavering like will-o'-the-wisps through the continuous downpour, the old man—Thierry Darsus, Count of Brussels—bestowed a generous smile upon his Terran. "You did say Watteau? His remarkable ability killed Carrel and Memlink—he's a Terran, after all. But it will be difficult to get through very far. Never mind that, Brant—you'd better calm down a little. Tonight is your first and biggest job since you assumed the office of police commissioner. Try not to fail by being too enthusiastic."

"I will take that point very much to heart," Brant replied. Louis Brant, the middle-aged man who had accepted the new post of Alliance Police Commissioner following the resignation of former Police Commissioner Jan van Maylen, wore a fawning smile. He rubbed his hands—and if he had a tail, he certainly would've been wagging it. "Tonight, there won't be one civilian in the airport. All the passengers, service workers—even the maintenance personnel—actually will be two hundred policemen in plain clothes. As soon as that priest, Hugue de Watteau, sets foot in the airport, we'll restrain him at once."

"Do the policemen know Watteau's face? Also, there surely will be

people among them who supported the Watteau family. How did you explain the situation to them?" asked Darsus.

"I told them that he's an international terrorist who attacked former Police Commissioner Jan van Maylen," Brant replied. His smiling face, with its protruding front teeth, was undeniably vulgar, but Brant's practical business ability had been highly esteemed from the time he had been vice commissioner. "Ten years ago, Hugue de Watteau slaughtered his family, including his father. After that, he engaged in terrorist activity as a fugitive, but he recently returned to his old home. Tonight, he's planning to attack the ship Omegang and indiscriminately slaughter its passengers. That's how I explained it to the policemen."

Darsus nodded, stroking his black eyebrows—the only thing among his pure white hair and whiskers that looked oily. When he put the glass he picked up to his mouth, he thanked his subordinate, who continued trying to brag about his achievements. "Thank you, Brant. I'll expect good news from you later. Shall I go soon, too?" asked Darsus.

Brant regarded Darsus with a surprised face. The old vampire finished his wine in one gulp and stood up, dusting off his cuffs. "Where are you going, Your Excellency?" asked Brant. "Will you meet and attack Watteau on this ship?"

"Meet and attack him? Me—for one Terran? There's no need for that," said Darsus. As he put on the jacket the maid had reverently handed him, Darsus smiled generously. "I'll leave him to the Terrans. Never mind that, Brant—you come with me. Let's go back to the mansion and have a drink."

"N-no, but . . ." Brant's face clouded. Having put on such a grand show only moments earlier, a person as timid as he was probably was ashamed about leaving the scene in the middle of a large job and refused, incoherently. "Regardless of whether it's temporary, we can get revenge for Count Amsterdam and Count Antwerp. Did Your Excellency consider witnessing Watteau's demise personally?"

"You've already taken enough measures and the result already is in view. Besides, you'll never calm down here. I think I'll sit down,"

said Darsus, whose eyes twinkled mischievously. As he struck the carpet with the stick in his hand, his smile turned devilish.

Brant grew suspicious as he scanned the countless wooden boxes lined up beneath the rolled-up carpet. "What are those, Your Excellency?"

"These? Just bombs," Darsus replied calmly.

The police commissioner leaned backward, twisting his squirrely face. "B-bombs?"

Darsus laughed, revealing a rare glimpse at his prankster spirit. "It's not that I don't trust you, but my style is to take the utmost care. If Hugue de Watteau manages to break through the police and make it this far, I'll activate these bombs at once. By the time he puts one foot on the gangplank, not even his bones will remain. One ship and the lives of fifty crew members—don't you think that's a cheap price to pay to bid good riddance to the man who has tormented us?"

The eldest member of Count Four was considered to be a moderate, but Brant had heard that Darsus' methods were so brutal that they had been feared by fellow members of his own tribe. Brant was left speechless, confronted with a brand of cold-bloodedness he'd never before encountered. Was this monster suggesting that he'd blow up a ship and use fifty crew members as bait in order to finish off one man?

As the police commissioner held his breath, the old man turned down the carpet and began slowly exiting the room. Standing tall, he laughed pleasantly. "Well, c'mon, Brant. I set some red wine aside in the mansion. Why don't we open it and drink it leisurely tonight?" asked Darsus.

IV

"**S**top there!" shouted a voice. Without heeding the policeman's order, a passenger car drove up to the inspection gate. The driver's seat window rolled down in front of the policeman who came running up from the checkpoint. "Thank you. I'm Roddenbach from the Prosecution Bureau's Fourth Division," said George. After the young man flashed the prosecutor's badge on his collar, he held a thin file over his head to shield it from the rain. "I'm forcibly repatriating an illegal immigrant in detention. I believe the formalities already have been taken care of?" asked George.

"Yeah, it's the incident we received a report on a little while ago, right? I've heard," replied the policeman, nodding civilly beneath his raincoat as he reviewed the document. Confirming that the contents were complete, he glanced at the man slumped in the rear seat. He couldn't see the man's face very well because his head was wrapped in his jacket and his black hair was hanging down, but he quickly gave up trying to discern the man's identity. "There don't seem to be any problems with his documents. You're fine, public prosecutor. Please pass."

"Thank you," George said graciously. After returning the policeman's nod, the young man advanced his car through the downpour, carefully proceeding to the middle of the arrival and departure area. He peered suspiciously at what seemed to be airport maintenance people, but he managed to approach the hangar area without being approached or challenged.

"Watch carefully for suspicious people loitering and restrain them'—but don't be concerned about suspicious people who already are restrained," said George.

How far had he run? When the lights from the check station disappeared from his rearview mirror, Roddenbach again glanced at the mirror and addressed the prisoner still slumped in the backseat.

"It's all right, Hugue. Take off those prisoner clothes and change into the uniform."

As he removed his jacket and the wig from his head, Hugue replied sarcastically, "If you have documentation, they simply believe you. Apparently, the quality of Alliance police has fallen, too."

As soon as Hugue wiped off the makeup he'd bothered to apply, he began to change into the policeman's uniform handed to him. Roddenbach watched Hugue in the rearview mirror and shrugged, looking miserable. "All the Alliance police have been like this since the Watteau family was destroyed. They've become a collection of cowards and blockheads. Never mind that, though— the ship we were talking about has arrived."

Because of the heavy rain, George's and Hugue's field of vision was close to zero. As he gestured toward the huge shadow towering darkly beyond the screen of rain, the public prosecutor gripping the wheel began to appear rather tense. "The Omegang is the name of a passenger ship owned by a civilian airline company, but that airline company really is a perfect paper company. It's actually Darsus' privately owned ship. Are you ready, Hugue?" asked George.

"Yeah, anytime is fine," answered Hugue. After he accepted the iron rod handed to him, Hugue gently extended a hand toward the door, cracking it open. Soaking his face in the rain that trickled in, Hugue studied the silhouette of the huge ship.

Roddenbach took his right hand off the wheel and reached into the backseat "Be very careful — Darsus is the strongest. If you find that your situation is hopeless, withdraw at once."

"Thanks for your cooperation, Prosecutor Roddenbach," Hugue said calmly, pulling his beloved sword to the side of his body while once again neglecting to shake George's hand. "No matter what the result is, we'll never meet again." Before finishing his sentence, the young man disappeared from inside the car, energetically jumping down onto the rain-soaked asphalt and sprinting toward the towering black shadow ahead of him. His flashing green eyes were reminiscent of a death god that had fallen to Earth in order to mow down souls.

"Stop! Who are you?" yelled a voice.

When the plain clothes policemen, dressed like passengers in the arrivals area, finally noticed him, the mysterious shadow already had gotten so far that he could touch the airship if he reached hard enough. "Which police force are you from? Give me your station and full name. Y-you?" exclaimed the policeman posing as a maintenance worker with a strangled scream.

By the time the man had toppled, unable to thrust his hand into his pocket to search for his gun, Hugue's iron rod had struck another policeman disguised as a passenger carrying a suitcase, leaving the fake passenger with only one arm. Hugue forcefully swung his iron rod in the direction of three future victims, including the jaw of the last plain clothes policeman.

Amid the crunch of his jaw breaking and the echoes of his strained screams, the policeman fell to the ground, creating a blood-tinged splash. Meanwhile, Hugue, who'd attacked three policemen at once, wasn't even breathing hard. The glint in his green eyes grew more intense. *Is what I'm seeking really ahead of here?* he thought.

Although he'd toppled two of Count Four — Carrel van der Verf and Hans Memlink — Hugue still hadn't obtained the information about the revenge he sought, nor did he know the identity of the vampire who'd attacked the Watteau mansion that night. Did Darsus, the eldest of Count Four, know? Supposing he did know, could Hugue make him talk and still get out of the airport alive?

Hugue's stony gaze suggested that he had little hope left. He already didn't care what happened. At this point, regret about dying like a dog without achieving revenge would prove to be sweeter than confronting the fear of surviving. The swordsman's ghostlike eyes sized up the side of the airship, where warm lights were on in all of the neatly aligned ship windows and the crew members inside were busily working.

Still surveying the inside of the airship, Hugue was about to set his foot on the gangplank when his body flew up into the air. As if defying gravity, he did a back flip, landing several feet behind where he stood previously, where bullet holes had gouged the

asphalt. Using the iron rod like a pole vault, Hugue launched himself high into the air again as gunfire and bullets trailed his shadow.

"You're stubborn, Gunslinger!" Hugue shouted, hoarse from rain and exhaustion. When he landed, a blue-white flash shone from his hands. Holding his drawn sword high before his green eyes, the young man bellowed demonically, "Don't interfere with me!"

"I inform Hugue de Watteau—code name, Sword Dancer," said Tres standing beyond the curtain of showers, replacing his empty cartridge, "You've been ordered to return home. Accompany me at once, or else I'll bring you with me—even if it means using my full strength."

"Even if it means using your full strength, eh?" mocked the sword demon whose entire body radiated an air of sadness. Still standing and glaring at Gunslinger, Hugue slowly extended his sword forward from eye level. "Interesting, see? Try it if you can!"

As if responding to Hugue's challenge, ear-splitting thunder clapped, shaking the night sky and sending a white flash through the world, bleaching it blue-white. Sword Dancer closed the distance between himself and his opponent so swiftly that it seemed as though he had turned into lightning. The speed with which he ran through the water made him hard to follow with the human eye — but his opponent wasn't human.

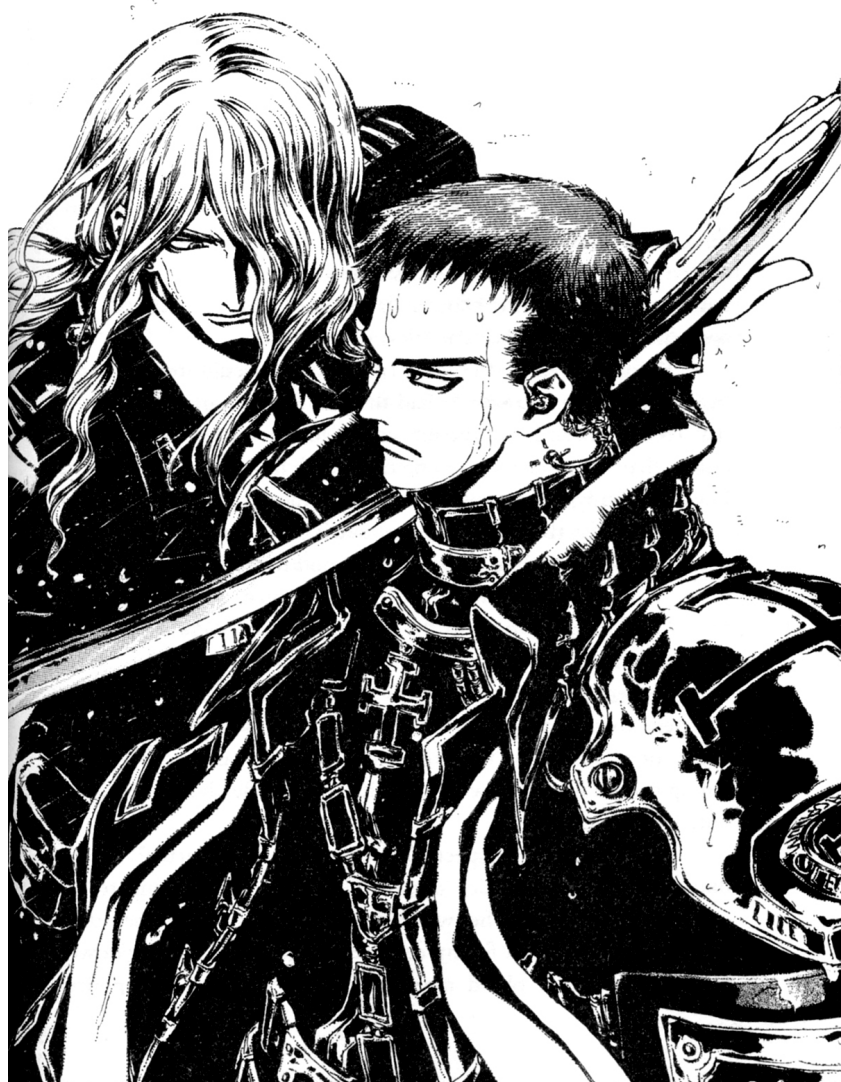
"Point nineteen seconds late," Tres announced.

As the remnants of thunder rattled, the sound of gunfire roared through the night. The Sure Fire attached to the battle gun's barrel struck Hugue as swiftly as the slash of a sword. Countless bullets fired in succession, ripping through the fierce rain and mercilessly piercing the enemy shadow.

It was only Hugue's shadow that was hit, however. "You are, indeed, appropriately called Gunslinger. If the rain hadn't served as my ally, I wouldn't have won," he said.

By the time Hugue's voice had been detected by Tres' audio sensors,

the swordsman who'd been closely following his enemy's shadow had pressed his sword to his comrade's throat. Sword Dancer had closed in by taking advantage of the mechanical soldier's sensors being confused by the rain and the screen of static electricity produced by the bolt of lightning. Declaring his victory in a surprisingly low voice, Hugue said, "From this distance, my sword is faster than your gun. I win, Gunslinger."



Tres' expression hadn't changed in spite of the sword pressing into his neck from the side. "That's a negative, Sword Dancer," he muttered softly, ignoring the raindrops bouncing off the sword, wetting his cheek. "You're the one who fell into the trap — Begin Operation Attachment."

All of a sudden, Hugue's body, which had been wrapped around Tres, flew up into the air. The ferocious blow felt as though an invisible fist had hit him in the abdominal cavity and forcefully threw his body backward, causing it to bend into a V shape. As he plummeted to the ground, a giant splash formed around the area in which he landed, "Gahhh!" A gasping scream escaped from the swordsman's mouth as he convulsed helplessly. Because his respiratory system had been paralyzed, his breathing was rough and sounded as though he were breathing using only his throat.

"Clear—confirmed that the enemy Sword Dancer is down," said Tres, watching as the smoke rising from Hugue's body formed quivering white lines in the rain. Metal rods protruded from Tres' twisted left wrist. As he reeled the high-voltage stun gun with an instantaneous electrical discharge of three hundred thousand volts back inside his wrist, Tres looked apathetically at Hugue. After confirming that Sword Dancer hadn't died from the shock, Tres approached at a slow but dauntless pace.

Before he reached Hugue, Tres' body suddenly started flying from side to side. No sooner had the tactical computer confirmed that Tres had been hit in the left side of his chest by a large-caliber bullet than the second volley fired directly into his stomach. His short body, which took a direct hit in the abdominal cavity, doubled over as though it were modeled on Hugue's figure a few moments earlier, rolling into a nearby muddy ditch.

"Did you bring him down?" asked a voice.

"Probably, but who in the world are they? Were they really human?" inquired another voice.

Under the lights that shone upon a group standing in the darkness, voices engaged in intense discussion overlapped with the sound of

raindrops. As the policemen spoke to one another, they ran up toward the scene where the duel-to-the-death had unfolded only seconds earlier.

"Who are they, inspector? Are they really terrorists?" asked the mobile military police commander carrying an antimateriel rifle on his shoulder; he was a member of special forces that specialized in riot and felony criminal suppression. Peering down suspiciously at the blond man who kept twitching, the police commander compared the figure with the photograph on the notice in his hand. "Hugue de Watteau—it's him. I'm positive this man used to be the oldest son of the Watteau family. Why would a man like that...?"

"I don't know—but it would be best if you didn't look into it," replied the commanding officer, cutting his subordinate's questions short. The commanding officer glanced in the direction of the airship, proceeding to put handcuffs on the swordsman's wrists. "How's that one? Is he dead?" he yelled angrily at his subordinates who ran in the direction of the gutter.

"Urn, that's . . . Sorry, but could you come over here for a minute, inspector?" asked the mobile military police officer gloomily as he stared down into the ditch, hefting the machine pistol to his hip.

"What's wrong? Something abnormal?" asked the shady inspector, who wore a cold expression.

"Yeah," answered the policeman.

The team members all pointed their superior officer toward the gutter. What had fallen into the ditch were black rags that seemed to be scraps of clothing, several cartridges that were still smoking, and . . .

"What does this mean?" asked the inspector. Wearing the same awestruck expression that his subordinates wore, the inspector knelt closer to the ditch. There was no sign of a man anywhere near it.

V

The interview room and the adjoining underground detention area were partitioned by thick bulletproof glass. Because the glass was extremely cloudy, the detailed expressions of the interrogator sitting beyond the glass weren't visible from the prisoner's side.

"We won't meet again"—that's what I heard," George said with a strange mixture of irony and relief. His voice still audible through the microphone, he said, "I'm happy we could meet again this soon, Hugue."

"Is it wise to make such stupid small talk, Prosecutor Roddenbach?" asked Hugue.

The public prosecutor, who'd come pretending to "discover the facts of the matter," had cleared out the guard policemen. Hugue was wearing ash gray prisoner clothing and was seated in a chair, which seemed like rather lenient treatment for a "dangerous international terrorist"—but that was to show that the interrogator had taken full responsibility.



"It isn't a formal hearing, is it? Shouldn't you disappear before the authorities spot you? If you're worried that I'll slip and say something about you, you shouldn't. There's no relationship whatsoever between you and me—you're a perfect stranger," assured Hugue.

"I'm not particularly worried about such things. However, it's true that there's not much time. This place is dangerous," George warned, sliding his hand along something beyond the glass. After keying in a complicated combination, the bulletproof glass separating him from Hugue began to move upward with an ear-splitting screech. "Come with me."

"What do you mean, prosecutor?" asked Hugue, glaring wide-eyed at the glass window. "I'm a terrorist, right? Would any other prosecutor let a guy like me escape?"

"I don't have an excuse—this will lead to my unemployment. I'm a criminal—the same as you—because I'm a terrorist sympathizer," George declared arrogantly but with a hint of shame. Suddenly, Roddenbach held up a long, thin bundle about the length of his body that had been placed on the floor, and then he held out a paper bag containing a complete policeman's uniform. "Change clothes and we'll leave here. Later, after we arrive at a safe place, we can talk at leisure."

Hugue was annoyed by the prosecutor's overly optimistic speech. "You say leave here, but do you know what in the world you're doing, Roddenbach? If you do something like this, you won't only lose your position—you're forfeiting your reputation, your social status—possibly your life."

"Perhaps, but I'm already aware of all that," Roddenbach replied with a cheerfulness that seemed as though he were discussing the weather. Taking his hand out of his pocket and offering it to Hugue, who was still seated, George smiled meekly. "The truth is that I'm a person without a single relative—just like you. There's nobody anywhere who'll be sad if I die." From the way that he delivered his admission, his inner strength shone through in spite of his submissive demeanor. "Besides, if you stay here, you'll be killed by

Darsus' assassins. It's not my preference to remain in a safe place alone, acting as a spectator from on high. I'm the one who put you in danger in the first place. How can I not take responsibility for that? Is what I'm saying wrong, Hugue?"

Hugue stared in astonishment at the hand held out before him. A person without a single relative—Hugue was that way, too. There were a lot of people trying to kill him, but nobody would be sad if he had died, hence his surprise that a hand had been extended to him.

"Let's go now," George urged once again without paying any mind to the priest's hesitation. "There's no time. Besides, I thought you hated small talk."

"Yeah, I hate it," Hugue said flatly. Unsure of how he truly felt, Hugue took his beloved sword out of the paper bag handed to him. Feeling the sensation of blunt iron in one hand, he grasped the prosecutor's hand with his spare hand. "You really are a stupid man."

"Yeah, I'm told that every day," George replied.

Unintentionally sending a wry smile in the direction of the prosecutor's mischievously winking face, Hugue had a sudden thought. *Assumptions are meaningless in life, but if I'd had a man like this for a friend, maybe I could've changed the path I took. I wouldn't have been sold out by my trusted childhood friend, nor would I have been betrayed by my fiancée. And maybe I wouldn't have had to cross swords with comrades who pointed guns at me, even though we had crawled beneath so much gunfire together up until this point.*

"Well, let's go, partner," said George.

"Yeah," Hugue replied, nodding.

"Oh dear—what's the matter, Father?" asked the night guard. Outside, the torrential downpour continued as it always did, but it was nearing dawn. The policeman in reception looked suspiciously at the shadow that came crawling in the front gate at the late hour. Glancing at the policemen on the early shift, who chatted in a

corner of the lobby while drinking coffee, the night guard repeated, "What's your business at this hour?"

"I'm Father Meyer from the Notre Dame de Sabron Church. When I was cleaning the worship hall before morning devotions, I discovered this thing in the confessional," said the short priest in a strange voice that lacked intonation. Without wiping the water dripping from his drenched head, he placed a large Boston bag in front of the policeman. "The contents being what they were, I decided that the bag had better be delivered quickly, so I brought it here. Confirm," said Tres.

"What are the contents?" asked the policeman, curiously peering into the Boston bag the priest handed him. *I don't know whether it's something lost or forgotten, but I wish he'd brought it after dawn*, he thought as he nervously opened the bag. "Wh-what is this?" The policeman's eyes bugged out at what sat inside the bag — long, thin, cylindrical objects tied together with a belt. The copper wires that extended from the end of the cylinders were tied together in a complex fashion and were attached to a small pocket watch. "A b-bomb?"

Suddenly, the long and short hands of the pocket watch overlapped, making a small clicking sound, and simultaneously, a white light burst up with a roar as if the sun had struck land. The explosion assaulted not only the unlucky policeman but all the people in the lobby. The stun grenade — a flash bomb that instantaneously burned fine aluminum powder and potassium perchlorate — didn't have killing power, but it had enough strength to knock down everybody in the area with its light and noise. There were policemen who had managed to withstand it, but there was more bad luck in store for them. Enveloped by the cloud of tear gas that spread following the flash, they began to cry and cough.

"Clear! Continue commencing search for target," ordered Tres.

Amid the dense gas that had obscured nearly everyone's field of vision was one man who stood calmly without a mask. Drawing two handguns from beneath his cassock, Gunslinger walked through the policemen squirming in pain, and into the entrance lobby.

VI

"So, where do we go from here?" asked Hugue, focusing on the prosecutor as he pressed the elevator button. "Are we returning to the old Prosecutors Bureau safe house?"

"That would be fine, but you go there by yourself. I still have one or two things to take care of here. I'll join you after I'm done, so rest there until then," George answered crisply as the elevator arrived with a clear chiming sound. Five policemen exited the elevator, silently passing Roddenbach, who had changed places with Hugue in order to hide him. They were about to take the policemen's place on the elevator when Hugue and Roddenbach heard a voice.

"Wait," called out a low, rusty voice. A large man with a section chief badge who happened to be the best dressed of the five policemen turned around. "There's something I want to ask you."

"What is it, section chief?" asked Hugue in a deliberately unsociable tone. As he worked with the light source to shadow his face, Hugue inched his hand toward his sword so that he'd be ready to draw it at any time. If the policemen saw his face, it would be the end. If worse came to worst, Hugue and Roddenbach would have to cut their way through, possibly spilling blood—but as of now, that merely was a baseless fear.

"What cell number is that terrorist Hugue de Watteau confined in?" asked the large section chief gruffly.

"He's in cell number three. It's just around the corner after you turn right at the end," Hugue replied.

"Really? Thanks," said the section chief, saluting.

Immediately after Hugue returned the chief's salute, the chief walked down the corridor with his subordinates. His shoulders sagging in relief, Hugue edged toward the elevator.

"No, Hugue!" By the time Roddenbach screamed, the swordsman had unsheathed his sword as if it were a living thing.

Relying only on the image reflected in the lenses of Roddenbach's glasses, Hugue whirled the blade behind him. The grating, high-pitched sound of metal scraping against metal reverberated down the extent of the gloomy hallway.

"Pretty good, aren't you?" asked Luciano. Taking advantage of his height to thrust his sabre as far as possible, the giant section chief — or rather the man masquerading as a section chief — slid his long tongue across his lips. The policemen had surrounded the two men, creating a semicircular barrier. "You're the first one to parry the sword of Luciano Riggio,"

"Luciano Riggio — Yellow Pocket Luciano!" George shrieked as he repeated the name of the professional assassin whose arms were dyed yellowish-brown by special drug strengthening.

Upon mentioning Yellow Pocket Luciano, there wasn't a chance of anyone not knowing of the Vatican's fortified killer-soldier and his brutal way of working. His fees were extremely high, but nobody survived the aim of Luciano's sword. It was undetermined how such a dangerous man made his way inside.

"Darsus paid you?" Hugue asked as his face went pale from staving off the deadly sabre from a disadvantageous position. "Hired by a vampire, Yellow Pocket?"

"It doesn't matter who pays me. If I'm hired by a vampire, I can still kill God," said Luciano, smiling so wide as to make visible his teeth, which were the only white things on his dull gray face. His drug-strengthened muscles pressed the sword toward Hugue's blond hair. The strength of an ordinary person was no match against the power of a fortified soldier. As soon as Luciano's muscular arms contracted, he gathered all his might for one fatal blow against his target.

"Uh-oh, Hugue!" cried George.

"Don't move!" Hugue shouted.

As Roddenbach, who'd tried to jump forward, was pushed backward by the fake policemen, Luciano's sabre slashed against Hugue's sword. Hugue's body, which was as thin as it was tall, appeared as though it would be cut in two.

"You can kill God? Determined, aren't you?" sneered Hugue, screwing his face into an expression more evil than his opponent's. "But what if your opponent is a death god? Can you still kill him?"

All of a sudden, a shrill metallic noise resounded throughout the hall.

"C-crazy!" wailed Luciano, widening his eyes in surprise as his huge body was blown backward through the air. His shock was justified, considering the priest's thin arms had flipped the fortified soldier's body—more than double his own weight—with ease. But before Luciano could recover from such a jolt, white flashes danced before his dazed eyes.

"Unfortunately, my arms are custom-made," said Hugue, casting an evil shadow on his thin grinning face with the reflection from his unsheathed sword. In a low voice appropriate for a death god, Hugue whispered to the fortified soldier. "You picked a bad opponent, Yellow Pocket. Die!"

"W-wait, priest!" cried a voice seconds before Hugue plunged his sword. But it wasn't the voice of the fortified soldier whose eyes had bugged out as if he were about to die. It was a fake policeman—his gun aimed at Roddenbach—who shouted, trying to save his boss. "Can't you see this? If you don't want me to put enough holes in your pal's head that the wind will blow through it, throw down your weapon and come quietly!"

"No, Hugue!" George exclaimed without trembling, in spite of the handgun pressed to the back of his head. He forced out a louder cry, as not to be overridden by the fake policeman's shout. "Forget about me! Escape by yourself. Ugh!"

"You shut up!" Luciano shouted, hitting the prosecutor and shoving the gun muzzle into his temple.

"Well, what are you going to do? If you hesitate, I'll blow off one of his ears. How about that?" asked the man.

"Stop," said Hugue, responding to the crude threat by moving his sword away from Luciano's heart. Dexterously twirling the sword once in the air, he thrust it deep into the floor. "I'll do as you say, so let him go."

"What are you doing, Hugue?" George screamed, staring in disbelief at the face of the swordsman who'd let go of his treasured sword. "I told you to forget about me! What are you doing?"

Hugue didn't answer the distraught voice and instead warped his mouth into a bitter smile. Suddenly, a large shadow stood up before his eyes.

"This jerk—threatening us!" shouted Luciano, shaking with anger. Yellow Pockets stood up and fiercely swung down his sabre, striking the cheek of the swordsman.

Hugue's body staggered after receiving the blow, which felt as though it had busted a cheekbone. Before Hugue had time to lean against the wall, he felt Luciano's kick sink into his stomach. The swordsman's body folded at the pain in his solar plexus, and he knelt on the spot. Blood from his esophagus and broken molars dripped from his mouth, which was gaping in attempt to get oxygen.

Suddenly, a man said, "Um, Luciano, I understand how you feel, but if we don't escape right away, time—

"I know!" shouted Luciano, angry that his subordinate had the gall to hurry him. Luciano appeared as though he was still trying to drive away his humiliation from earlier, but he also seemed to acknowledge that there was no time. As he grasped the sabre in his other hand, he held it high over the swordsman's head. "Farewell!"

"Hugue!" screamed George as the triumphant flash of the sabre hurtled toward the swordsman.

All of a sudden, a hail of bullets pelted down through the ceiling,

shooting through the assassin's body as he was trying to skewer Hugue, and pulverizing the head of the fake policeman who'd held George hostage with a gun. It was a miracle that Roddenbach wasn't the least bit injured, although he'd been confronted with death for most of the episode. There was only one person who could've pulled off such a stunt.

"Gunslinger!" exclaimed Hugue. Still cringing on the floor, Hugue gazed up weakly at the short shadow that had been shot up like a honeycomb and was descending through the ceiling.

Tres hefted his handguns in both hands, announcing to everyone curtly, "Request that nobody move. Throw down your weapons and kneel."

"D-damn you!" said a policeman.

As if released from a spell by Tres' steely tone, the fake policemen who had been standing there aghast moved, pointing their guns at the intruder.

Another policeman shouted, "I don't know who you are, but we'll beat you to dea—"

"Point thirty-eight seconds late," said Tres. His two handguns emitted such an impressive amount of fire and smoke that it didn't seem real. The policemen who still had their fingers on the triggers were blown backward and their heads were turned into lumps of blood, leaving vile red blossoms to adorn the wall near where the headless corpses were piling up.

"Come, Roddenbach!" shouted Hugue. It had taken only a few seconds from the first warning to the massacre, but Hugue considered that to be enough of a delay to plan his escape. Standing up, he drew his sword, which was still stuck in the floor. Grasping the shoulder of the young man, Hugue threw him into the elevator. "Go ahead!" Hugue shouted as he closed the elevator's lattice door from the outside. "I'll go, too!"

"All right!" George said obediently, probably afraid he'd be grabbed as a hostage again.

"Wait above—I'll come no matter what!" Hugue shouted. "Yeah," George replied.

After confirming that the elevator had started, Hugue turned his eyes to the hallway. There wasn't one human standing on two feet in the red-stained corridor—except for one human-shaped machine whose glass eyes were sparkling.

"Former Agent Hugue de Watteau," Tres said, pointing his two smoking guns at his former comrade, "throw down your weapon and kneel. If you resist, I'll shoot you to death."

VII

The booming of gunfire intertwined with the ongoing rumbling of thunder.

Bullets knocked off a few blond hairs and had gouged large holes about the size of fists into the wall that Hugue had stood in front of before he dove to the side. From this distance, a gun absolutely had an advantage over a sword. Flinging open an iron door by pushing it with his shoulder, Hugue rolled inside,

"Wait, Watteau," said Tres.

Hugue heard the monotone voice behind him, but he didn't turn around. After cutting off the knob so the iron door couldn't be opened from the outside, he ran up the emergency stairs. Gunslinger wouldn't need much time to force an iron door open, after all—but Hugue aimed to get to the surface in that short period of time. To his surprise, gunfire didn't assault him from behind as he'd predicted—or had Tres forfeited the pursuit? With a flurry of disappointing thoughts swirling in his mind, Hugue ran up the stairs. Bisecting a locked iron door with a swish of his sword, he kicked it down and jumped through. His sword still drawn, he turned around to counterattack his pursuer, but there was no sign that Tres was running up the stairs.

"Did he give up?" asked Hugue, peering through the iron door and slowly stepping backward. Beyond the narrow corridor, there was a gray door with a sign that seemed to indicate it was an emergency exit, and the area outside the police station extended beyond that door. Still walking backward, Hugue carefully made his way toward the exit, but an unexpected shot pierced the wall right next to him. If the timing of his jump had been a half-second off, the shot would've blown off the lower half of his body. The bullets that grazed his pant leg gouged large holes in the opposite wall.

"Through the wall?" said Hugue, clicking his tongue. He twisted his body in the air and assumed a strike posture. Before he landed, he thrust his sword toward the wall, forcefully plunging through its thin layers. Picking up a faint signal through the wall, Hugue set his target and thrust his sword into the wall again—but this time, a spray of bullets hurled back at him.

"Ugh!" Hugue moaned as at least one of the bullets grazed the right side of his head. The 512 Maxima rounds' shockwave rivaled the punch of a pro boxer and could kill an elephant instantly. The vision in his right eye blurry, Hugue literally had to grind his teeth to avoid losing consciousness. Once again assuming the strike position, he plunged his sword into the wall a third time.

A monotone voice addressed Hugue through the wall: "Hugue de Watteau," said Tres, "the Duchess of Milan cares about your safety. Return quietly to Rome now. If you resist more than this, I won't be able to avoid shooting you to death."

His cheek illuminated by a red laser light helming through a hole in the wall, Hugue twisted his face as if he were mocking himself. All of his senses—not only his sight—had sharpened, allowing him to accurately pinpoint his enemy's location. If he thrust his sword, he easily could pierce through Tres' chest. He should've been dead from a bullet between the eyes, but the swordsman couldn't lower his sword. He'd always told himself that those who live by the sword, die by the sword.

"I told you, Gunslinger," said Hugue, "I have no place to return to. If you want to stop me, kill me." Wearing a conflicted expression that revealed both his elation and fear, Hugue gripped his sword as tightly as he could. Hearing the dry sound of a gun hammer lifting on the other side of the wall, he flexed every muscle in his body, unleashing a full-strength blow toward the other side.

"Hugue de Watteau!" shouted Luciano.

The grating voice, muffled by blood, halted the swordsman's swing. As he turned around, Hugue caught sight of a huge shadow looming down the corridor. "Luciano?" he gasped as his eyes opened wide in astonishment. *He's alive . . .*

The assassin's blood-smeared face contorted fiendishly. The gaping holes gashed into his stomach by gunfire appeared to be fatal, but that wasn't what made Hugue shudder—it was the cylindrical object the howling giant was carrying on his shoulder.

"Grenade launcher—uh-oh!" Hugue exclaimed, knowing there was nowhere to run from a grenade explosion in that narrow corridor.

Luciano roared with laughter at the swordsman who seemed to have gone blank. "Die!"

Suddenly, Tres' low, sharp voice shouted through the wall: "Don't move that sword, Sword Dancer!"

There was no time to turn around. The bullets that flew from beyond the wall caught Hugue's sword from the side. The monomolecular crystal sword withstood the direct hit, deflecting the bullets and causing them to ricochet. The bullets reversed direction down the corridor, disappearing as though they had been absorbed back into the gun muzzle of the grenade launcher.

"Ah?" That one stupid word became Luciano's last. With its explosive force and fragments, the grenade blast turned his body into mincemeat.

The strength of the unearthly wind blew Hugue's body back into the emergency door he'd aimed for earlier. Pushing the door down with his shoulder, he tumbled outside onto the rain-soaked stone pavement. "Ugh—oof!"

His ears still ringing from the blast, Hugue raised his blood-and-mud-smeared face with no knowledge of how much time had passed. It was dark outside, but he couldn't figure out if the white fog hanging before his eyes was smoke or if his eyes had been scratched and he was losing his sight.

As the swordsman tried to regain consciousness by shaking his head, an unsympathetic voice spoke over his head. "Hugue de Watteau, you're under arrest," said Tres. As Hugue peered through blurry eyes, he made out the face of his grim-looking former comrade staring down at him. "You've already used all your battle

strength. Accompany me to Rome."

Tres knelt beside Hugue, who was still on the ground. After putting his own cassock over Hugue's uniform, which had been tattered by the explosion, Tres flung the swordsman over his shoulder with ease. As he was about to walk off, the mechanical soldier continued in a flat voice, "Concerning Count Four and the old church incident in Amsterdam—the Duchess of Milan plans to take special measures. There's no need for you to settle everything alone."

His vision was still clouded, but Hugue tried to study Tres's profile. The mechanical soldier had no expression—he lacked any such function. Perhaps it was only the annoying ringing in his ears, but Hugue's conscience seemed to be sending him faint feelings of pity toward his captor.

"Hugue!" yelled George from across the road, interrupting Hugue's thoughts as he was about to address his former comrade. At the same time, a bullet had fired, hitting Tres directly in the leg as he was carrying Hugue.

Tres' body—his right thigh pierced by a large-caliber round—wobbled severely. His balancers activated, trying to correct the machine's posture, but a second bullet fired, hitting him directly in the left thigh. This time, it exceeded the balancers' allowable range. As soon as he let go of Hugue's arm, the mechanical soldier stumbled and staggered.

Meanwhile, the young man grasping the handlebars of a motorbike raced along, calling again to Hugue who had been liberated: "Are you all right, Hugue? Get in!"

"Roddenbach!" exclaimed Hugue, noticing that George held a rifle in one hand.

After the young prosecutor threw away the rifle, he held out a hand to the swordsman. "What are you doing? Hurry and get on!"

"Wait, Hugue de Watteau," Tres said, desperately trying to move his wounded legs and correct his posture. Extending his hand to Hugue, he said, "I have to take you to the Duchess of Milan."

As he took one step back from the wounded mechanical soldier, Hugue shook his head. "Sorry." Grabbing hold of Roddenbach's hand, he said goodbye once more. "Sorry, Father Tres."

"Wait, Watteau!" shouted Tres.

Although the mechanical soldier's fingers grazed Hugue's sleeve momentarily, the motorbike carrying Sword Dancer sped down the stone pavement.

"A report has come in from Father Tres—he failed to arrest Sword Dancer," the hologram of the nun with the mole under her eye reported to her mistress with a troubled expression. "Tres is asking for permission to continue following him, but . . . What shall we do, Caterina?"

"Have Father Tres temporarily suspend pursuit and return to Rome," Caterina ordered without raising her eyes from the report she'd been reading for quite a while. "There's no time to deal with Sword Dancer now. A serious problem has arisen in Barcelona."

"In Barcelona? Oh no! Has anything happened to Abel or Noelle?" asked Kate, referring to the comrade who'd gone to Catalonia to settle the Neverland Island incident that had occurred last month. She was certain that the retired agent mistress would be following up with Abel in Barcelona. It wouldn't be that strange if Noelle were there . . .

Caterina didn't appear to be feeling very well upon closing the report. Holding her small clenched fist to her mouth, she said, "Last night, the entire city of Barcelona was destroyed. It seems that Sister Noelle is probably dead."

"Wh-what?" Kate was taken aback, unaware that her hologram had wavered noticeably. *What does she mean, "the entire city was*

destroyed"? What in the world happened to Noelle and Abel?

"I'll go now to report to the Cardinals' College. Sister Kate, you confirm the situation in Barcelona. Gypsy Queen should be in Sevilla, right? Have her sent there immediately. Also, commence the procedure to get Dandelion out of his cage," said Caterina. After the Iron Woman crisply delivered orders to the nun, she picked up her outer garment. There was no time left before the Cardinals' College emergency session. With her cardinal's cane in hand, she left the room.

"U-um, Caterina!" shouted Kate in effort to call back Caterina. "What should we do about Hugue? If I recall Tres, some other personnel —

Caterina shook her head at Kate's question, which seemed to plead for mercy. "There's no need for that." Perhaps because she thought her answer hadn't provided sufficient explanation, she quietly added, "I will divest Hugue de Watteau of his priesthood today. He . . ." Her voice was sweet, but her eyes flashed with the strength of steel. The Iron Woman softly but decisively announced to the frightened nun, "I'm cutting him loose."